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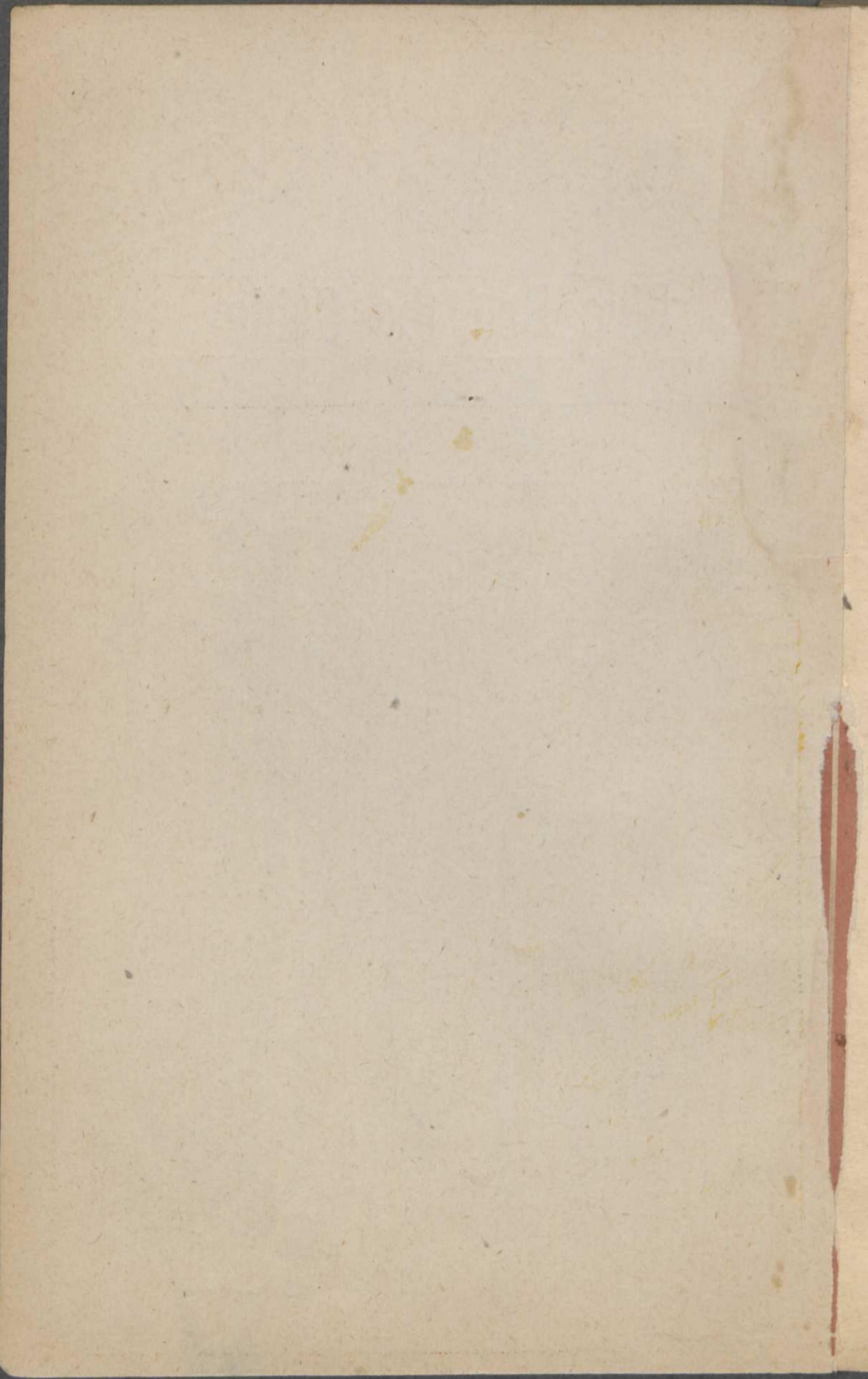
POCKET NOVELS



Blue Belt, the Guide.

270





BLUE BELT, THE GUIDE;

OR

THE RED COMPACT.

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BLUE BELT, THE GUIDE;

OR,

THE RED COMPACT

CHAPTER I.

THE RED COMPACT.

SOMEWHERE away in the West, a narrow road wound around between hills and over them, up and down, with a dreary prospect on every hand, with no enchanting views to greet and delight the weary traveler. The most monotonous forests in the world were those through which it passed, and the muddiest, most commonplace streams were those which it crossed. Sloughs and mud-holes alternated with rocks and other obstructions to vex and delay the traveler.

Yet along this weary route a few human habitations were scattered, here and there one, and some distance ahead you would come upon a settlement which bore the euphonious name of Silver City. Why it should have been called SILVER City, or city of any kind, is one of those problems which only the genus American can solve. Certainly no silver had been there within the memory of man, save such meager supplies as the settlers carried in their pockets. So far as "city" was concerned, the claim was supported by seven buildings, three of which were barns, one a saw-mill, one a blacksmith shop, one a log-cabin inhabited by two families, and the last, scarcely larger, bore upon a rough board over the door a scrawled inscription in red chalk, which a deal of study might decipher thus:

"T A V H U R N."

A little lower down, on a smaller board, was inscribed :

"G R O S R E."

These two signs gave the traveler to understand that here

might be found questionable accommodations for the night and as many burning draughts of raw whisky as he chose to pay for.

Having thus observed the place outside, let us step within.

It is nearly dusk, and the season is early summer.

The bar-room is not very large in size, and not particularly clean in appearance. Still, inside we find six men. One sits behind the rude bar, and by his important air proclaims himself master in that place; two bend over a dirty checker board, making desperate "moves" for the mastery; as many more sit lazily smoking, while one, a young man, from his entirely different appearance, seems to be a stranger in the place.

His appearance is better than that of the others, for he is better dressed, his general manner is different, and more like one who has mingled with the world; he neither smokes nor chews, but sits carving with his knife a small stick, and apparently rapt in thoughts of far away.

As we shall have much to do with him, a little more extended description may not be amiss.

In age he might have seen twenty-five years, but not above that number. Taller than most men, standing fully six feet, well and firmly built, with features which, if not handsome, were more than passable, with black hair, flashing dark eyes of wondrous expression, and a calm yet decided bearing, he was just the one to capture the heart of a romantic girl, and become a leader among his fellow-men. But there seemed no romantic maidens here, and he was not a leader, but a ranger, among the men who now surrounded him—an object of suspicion and distrust, as we shall presently see.

Just as the successful player had secured his first "king," the door was darkened by an entering figure, and an Indian rode into the room, taking his position near the young man, of whom we have made especial mention.

Sharp glances were bent upon the new-comer, but he spoke not a word, only standing there like a statue for a few moments, and then, with an almost imperceptible glance toward the young man, glided out again through the door.

The young stranger rose from his seat, a moment later,

and followed the Indian, utterly regardless of the sharp scrutiny which every eye in the room bent upon him.

The landlord bowed both elbows upon the bar; the smokers withdrew their pipes an inch or two; the checker-players turned so suddenly as to displace their remaining men; and all gazed, with visages full of curiosity, until the retreating forms were beyond their farthest sight.

Then followed a few moments of profound silence, during which the five gazed at each other as though spell-bound.

"See here, gentlemen," said one of the smokers, rising and bending in the direction of the door, while he spoke, very slowly—"see here, gentlemen, can any of you tell me the meaning of that 'ere?"

"You can ask me any thing else," said the landlord, with a shake of his head, "but *thar'* you've got me."

"'Cause if anybody kin tell me," the first speaker pursued. "I'd be glad to know more about it. Don't seem to me this is a time when strangers and Injins orter be puttin' their heads together, and nobody know what they're about."

"No, that's what it ain't," broke from all present.

The speaker, who was almost a giant in stature, drew him self up to his full hight, and continued:

"This chap has been hangin' around here about a week, now, and nobody knows what he's arter. He may be all right; but if he *is*, why don't he come out and let honest men know what he's here for? We all know Blue Belt; he's not an Injin that we could trust any time, say nothin' of *now*, when the reds are all off the hooks, and likely to come down on us for a regular fight within a month. It ain't a time when we orter be careless, boys. And if ye want my opinion as to what ye'd orter dew, I kin give it mighty easy."

"Let's have it," suggested one.

"Wal, it's jest this—nothin' more. Send the red-skin a-flyin', and make this chap come to time. He kin tell us his business, and then we kin make up our minds about him."

A momentary silence ensued, and then the landlord spoke, but his voice was low, and a trifle unsteady.

"Fur as the young fellow goes, he pays well for board, and if he—if he's all right, I should want to—should like to hev him stay as long as he takes a notion to. Pit, see here, Tom,

you've done some big scoutin' in your day--ain't you **smart** enough to find out what all this means?"

The big man stood staring at those about him for a minute and then returned :

"If I *can't* there needn't any of *you* try it. Glad you put that idee in my head. I'll go for him jest about now."

He moved to the door, glanced out, and then looked carefully around, as though to satisfy himself that those he sought were not in the immediate vicinity. Then, like a monstrous beast of prey, he crept away, gliding from one covert to another.

The evening shades had not yet declined into dusk, although the full light of day was neutralized by the gloom of approaching night.

Tom Taylor passed quickly around the building from which he had emerged, and finding nothing of the twain he sought proceeded to the barn. Here his search was just as unsuccessful, and an exclamation of disappointment fell from his lips.

"Confound it, they've gone to the woods," he muttered. "Never mind ; if they're any better acquainted there than I am, all right."

In two minutes he was in the shade of the forest, and notwithstanding his immense figure, so stealthy had been his movements that no one would have observed them, unless watching for that purpose.

Once under cover he glided along rapidly, and soon was a hundred rods away from the starting point.

He was just beginning to feel that he was mistaken, when he heard voices close at hand, and instinctively threw himself prone on the ground. Listening a moment, however, he was convinced that the voices were those of the men he sought and then he carefully drew nearer. Peering around a tree he saw them both standing not more than twenty feet away, and earnestly engaged in conversation.

The young man had his left arm bared almost to the shoulder, and held, rather irresolutely, a small, sharp-pointed knife.

"I will seal the compact in this way, *if you insist*," he said. "But it seems to me that we could be brothers, and **work together without**"

"Blood makes brothers," the Indian answered, slowly.
"No blood, no brother."

"Your Indian customs are different from mine," the young man pursued, still rather reluctant in tone and manner. "I have but one reason for wishing not to do this. A crowd of lazy loafers frequent the tavern where I stay, and they already regard me with a great deal of jealousy. Should they by any possibility discover any thing of this, we should be greatly imperiled, and possibly all our plans would fail. But if you insist upon it, let us be sure no one is near, and then be done with it as quick as possible. You know, Blue Belt, how important it is that I succeed."

The Indian grunted an affirmative, and then both cast quick glances through the darkening forest. They did not observe the spy who stood within a half-dozen yards of them.

Thrusting the sharp point of the knife into his arm, Charles Marline handed the weapon to the Indian, who followed suit. Then placing and pressing the two tiny wounds together, they forced the few drops of blood which flowed to mingle.

Then each hastily wiped his wounded arm, and grasped the other's hand, repeating the single word:

"Brother!"

The Indian and his confederate then moved slowly away from the spot, and Tom Taylor knowing the danger of attempting to follow them, hastened back to the tavern.

He at once took Bawny Corrol, the host, aside, and it was fully half an hour before they returned to the bar-room. When they did return, and take a drink over the dirty bar, both their faces wore a singularly satisfied expression.

CHAPTER II.

DRUGGED.

IT was almost dark when Charles Marline returned to the tavern, and he came alone. Evidently those present wondered what had become of the Indian, but they did not manifest their curiosity by words.

"Come, boys," said the landlord, soon after the young man returned, "supper is a-waitin'. Take a drink all round at my expense, and then we'll go in!"

There was a general rush for the bar, and in a moment more the glasses were clinking musically, though sad, sad to the true heart is such music.

But the young man, instead of joining the crowd at the bar, remained seated, quite regardless of the social knot, ready casting back inquiring glances at him.

"Come up, youngster," said Tom Taylor, turning back, with his glass half-raised. "It's Bawny's treat."

"No matter about that," was the composed answer; "I could treat myself if I wished. But I do not care to drink."

"Oh yes, take hold!" said the smiling host. "I'll warrant I've got as good as ye kin find in these parts. You've scarcely taken one drink since you came here."

"No doubt your liquor is good enough; as good as any. But I find that the man who takes a glass now and then is very apt to lose his senses. So when I'm on business I never use any."

Bawny and Tom exchanged quick, sharp glances, and the latter turned, as though to make a fiery rejoinder. But the host grasped his arm, gave him a wink, accompanied by a shake of the head, and left the bar.

"I like, when I treat a crowd, to have 'em all take hold," he said. "But if a man don't believe in it, that is *his* affair, and not mine. Come out, gentlemen; supper is all ready."

The party repaired to the supper-room, where they did ample justice to the fare which awaited them. Cups of very agreeable coffee steamed beside the plates, of which Charles drank freely, though he ate but little.

When the meal was concluded, he withdrew to his own room, closed the door, and seated himself near the window.

The apartment was not an inviting one, though the best the young man had been able to obtain. It was low, had only the roof above it, and the single small window looked out upon the forest. The partition which divided it from the remainder of the building was of boards—double, be sure—so that it was secure from observation from without, but finished no further. The door was guiltless of any fastening.

not having even a latch to keep it closed. But Charles had occupied the room a week already, and was accustomed to its deficiencies.

On closing the door, he thrust his pocket-knife into the casing in such a manner as to supply the place of a latch, and then seated himself as before stated.

"How strange my head feels," he repeated to himself, after sitting thus for a few minutes. "There's a deal of excitement in this enterprise; but who would think that a man of my nerve would be so overcome by it? My head is in a perfect whirl. I scarcely know what I am thinking about. Ha! it lightens! does it, or am I beside myself? Yes, it is lightning; there is going to be a thunder-shower. It must be *that* which makes me feel so strangely. I do believe I'm getting benumbed! I don't seem to feel any thing. Can it be that I have been poisoned? Sure, I am not dying! If I am, it is a very easy way!"

His thoughts became wild and confused. He attempted to reason, but the words he uttered expressed no thoughts, and finally he sunk over against the window, breathing, with little or no consciousness of what was transpiring about him.

He did not hear a gentle rap or whispered words at the door of his apartment; was not aware some one sought entrance. He was aware, however, when the continued pressure forced the knife from its place, and caused it to fall to the floor. He heard the sound, and comprehended its cause; but when he endeavored to raise himself sufficiently to give some attention to the alarm, found himself quite unable to do as he wished. Even while he made the effort, he forgot the cause of it, and sunk back, utterly helpless.

The door was already ajar. Then it swung further open, and some one peeped timidly in.

It was a girl's face which was thrust in thus, and on seeing the condition of the inmate, she hastily entered the room, and crossed to his side.

"What is the matter?" she asked, in an agitated tone.

The young man seemed aware of the presence, and attempted to make an answer to the question, but his tongue refused to move audibly, and he sunk back again.

The girl manifested much alarm, which was not lessened

when the storm burst upon the building in all its force. The wind was quite strong, and the rain fell almost in torrents. The ill-fated window seemed scarcely to present an obstacle, so that the wind and rain dashed in upon the senseless man.

The maiden drew back from the exposed spot, and then paused, as she noticed the manifest effect the cool rain had upon the guest.

"Oh, sir, wake up, rouse! you are in great danger here!" she exclaimed, shaking him by the arm. But all her efforts were vain, and he only manifested at best a half-lingering consciousness, which refused to be aroused to a sense of his condition.

Finding that her efforts in this direction were in vain, the girl set herself to work to loosen the window. This she soon did, and her exertions, coupled with the force of the wind, which beat full upon it, soon removed the narrow sash.

This she placed carefully upon the floor, and then, by slightly changing the young man's position, placed his head in the opening, exposed to the full fury of the blast, with the face partially turned upward.

This done, she looked upon her work for a moment with an air of satisfaction, and then glided hastily from the room.

The first describable sensation which Charles felt, after this, was one of drowning. It seemed to him as though immense oceans of water were piled upon him, under which he was vainly struggling for breath and motion. The whole world seemed a great dark void around him, through which flashed tongues of flame, while voices of thunder rolled in solemn awfulness.

But a fiercer dash of the rain into his exposed face awoke a fuller degree of consciousness, and with much of an effort he aroused himself, and took notice of his position.

He was lying as the girl had placed him, his head in the window, and his clothing pretty thoroughly drenched by the rain which had beaten upon him. But the cold water had overcome the effects of the narcotic he had taken, and with a shudder he sprung bolt upright.

"I must have some friend here," he remarked, glancing at the window. "Yes! the door is open—some one has been here."

He hastily satisfied himself that he had not been robbed, and then began replacing the window. He still felt strangely, but every moment he was mastering the sensations, and his brain was working clearer.

So busied was he with the work of replacing the window that he did not observe when the door was again pushed open, and the same girl glided once more into the room.

"Ah! you have recovered again," she said, gladly. "I am much rejoiced that you are awake once more!"

The young man turned at the sound of the voice. Through the darkness he could just distinguish sufficiently to recognize her.

"Is it you, Lena?" he asked.

"Yes, it is I; but how do you feel now? You were sick but a few minutes ago."

"Lena," he said, "you know about this—wasn't I drugged?"

"'Sh! It's enough for you to know that if you *were* drugged, I have waked you again. But you must be very careful; there is danger in this house to-night!"

"But how? What is it?"

"I can not tell you now. An Indian came here this afternoon—one that is hated and feared. He was followed. They learned something—so that *you must not sleep to-night!*"

"You mean that some one intends to murder me?"

"I know not what they might do if you were senseless, and in their hands; but they will not openly attack you. So if you keep awake, and have a light burning, they will not molest you."

The girl would have turned away but he called her back.

"Stay, Lena. It is of no use for me to stay here longer; I can find nothing that I sought, and I may as well leave this house to-night as at any time. Then I shall be rid of all this danger."

"No, you will be but just entering it. Should you leave the house it would be noticed—there are others here much better acquainted with this region than you can be, and you would not easily avoid them."

"I am armed."

"Then you are perfectly safe here. I will bring you some

pieces of candle, which will give you a light. Keep it shaded from the door, and I will see you again, *after you have had other visitors!*"

She stole from the room, but returned in a few minutes with some candles, which she placed upon the table beside him, and hurried from the apartment.

Charles gazed and listened till she was gone, and then hung a garment before the window; after which he lighted one of the pieces of candle.

Shading its light from the door, as she had suggested, he examined his revolver, satisfied himself that it was in order for use if desired, and then waited as calmly as possible for the visitation which he had been warned to expect.

CHAPTER III.

RECEIVING COMPANY.

IT was natural to suppose that Charles Marline did not feel very comfortable there alone in the attic, with the storm howling outside, and some impending fate brooding over him from within. Had he been a timid young man he would never have come out into that wild region upon any secret mission; on the contrary, he possessed a more than ordinary share of courage. But he did not like the idea of drugs, and storms, and secret plots against him, all at the same time. He felt that he had not more than half-recovered from the effects of the drug he had taken, and it was not pleasant to think that at any time he might again yield to its influence and become perfectly helpless in the hands of enemies who would not hesitate to murder him while in that condition.

He roused himself, and walked back and forth some time, pausing occasionally to listen at the door. But he could hear nothing, for the storm howled and raged outside, and the old tavern rattled and whistled and creaked so that an army might have stolen upon him unheard.

So he replaced the knife as carefully as possible, and seated himself again to await the issue.

In half an hour the storm had nearly passed over ; the thunder and lightning had entirely ceased, and the wind scarcely blew at all, so that the young man could now listen with some probability of hearing any one who should approach his door.

Presently he detected what he imagined to be a movement, and in a few moments was satisfied that parties were ascending the stairs. He shielded the rays of his candle carefully so that they should not betray the state of affairs to the approaching party, took his revolver in hand, and fixed his eye upon the door.

Very soon there was a shuffling of feet in the passage, which stopped in front of his chamber, and then a moderate pressure seemed to be applied to the door of his apartment. Of course the small pocket-knife made but little resistance, and as the force was carefully applied, soon fell to the floor within, as it had once before fallen.

The intruders hesitated for some moments, not having looked for an alarm like that, and then, finding that the obstruction was all gone, threw the door wide, and appeared on the threshold.

As they did so, Marline dropped the shade from his light, and the two parties remained for a moment gazing at each other.

In the door stood Bawny Corrol, holding a flaming candle, and just behind him loomed up the great figure of Tom Taylor. The intruders were evidently taken all aback by the sight which met their gaze, and if any plan had been formed, it was manifestly dashed to the earth at a blow.

Charles Marline waited a full minute for the intruders to make known their errand, and as they did not speak, he demanded :

“ Well, gentlemen ; what is wanted ? ”

“ Didn’t you call ? ” asked the host, advancing a pace into the room.

“ No, sir ; I did *not* call,” was the rather sharp rejoinder ; “ and what is more, I do not like the idea of having men running into my room at all hours of the night, without so much as asking my consent. If I want any thing, I shall be very certain to let you know so that there will be no mistake.”

"How the rain has beat in at this window!" Tom exclaimed, stepping toward it. "No wonder you did not go to bed."

A few more sentences were exchanged, when the visitors, finding all hopes of accomplishing their purpose gone, took themselves away.

Charles listened to their movements for some time, and when all was again quiet he barred the door by dragging up against it some of the furniture in the room, and then seated himself to think over the events of the night, and the prospects which surrounded him.

Some time had passed, and he was fast getting unconscious of all about him, when a low, half-timid knock sounded upon the door.

Taking a step or two in that direction, he asked:

"Who's there?"

"I."

He was almost sure that the voice belonged to the girl who had visited him a short time previous, but he feared deception, and asked again:

"Who is 'I'?"

"Lena," came through an aperture, in a whisper which could not be mistaken. "Can you come out? All is still below, and I've something to tell you."

Scarcely reflecting what he did, the young man extinguished the light, removed the old chest from the door, and stepped out. Lena was waiting for him, and led the way carefully, whispering as she did so:

"I think they are all asleep down-stairs. But if we steal out to the grain-crib, we can talk all we wish, with no danger of being overheard. Shall we go?"

Charles was going to say that he would follow to the ends of the earth if she led the way; but reflecting that it was not a time for extravagances, he checked himself, and replied with a simple affirmative.

There was but one stairway in the building, down which they passed cautiously, and out through the rear entrance, gaining presently a small building used for storing grain. It was empty now. The door was open, and Lena entered first, closing the door when Charles was inside.

CHAPTER IV.

A SURPRISE.

"Now," said the girl, Lena, when the young man was seated upon a block, and she had dropped upon the floor near him, "you must tell me all that happened—who came to your room, and what was said."

The young man complied, and when he had related the few events, continued by asking her a question.

"Can you not tell me why they came there? If they had any very evil purpose I wonder that they desisted so easily."

"Their purpose was evil enough, though they did not come there with the intention of killing or robbing you."

"Ah!"

"No. Their purpose was to search your person, supposing you to be under the influence of the drug you drank in your coffee, and their future course would have depended upon what they then discovered."

The maiden stopped for a moment, and finding she was not disposed to continue without being questioned, Charles asked:

"Why should they search me?"

Lena placed her hand lightly upon his arm. He shrank from the touch, for it rested upon the wound which had been made to seal the compact with his Indian friend.

"Those men knew of *this!*" she said, significantly.

Charles started, but quickly regained his self-possession.

"How do they know any thing of that?"

"You were followed and watched, because you were a subject of suspicion. Tom saw your compact with the Indian, and they—"

"Well, what? I made no criminal agreement with that Indian. He came to their house, and I went with him because I had that to say which concerned none else."

"None?"

"None here. But why do you question me so closely? Are you seeking to betray me?"

"What a sensible question! If I wished you ill, why did I not leave you helpless in their hands? Then you would not have needed to be *betrayed*!"

"Excuse me; there is something about all this I can not understand."

"Very likely. But I think I understand it all, pretty nearly."

"You?"

"Yes; I know not who you are, but I know why you are here!"

"You know why I am here? Pray tell me, then."

"That is scarcely necessary. But to convince you, I *will* tell. You came to search for something—a paper—a map—a chart—an old yellow bit of paper, with some faintly-drawn marks upon it in lead-pencil. Am I not right?"

It is tame to say that Marline was astonished by the girl's words. He was actually confounded, and struck dumb! Here was a secret which he had been guarding as his life—which he had not even dared whisper to himself, lest some one should steal it from him, and she possessed it fully. What did it mean? Had she a strange power for reading hidden things, that she had thus obtained his inmost secrets?

He sat there in the darkness, in a maze of wonder, while the fleeing minutes rolled away.

Lena spoke first.

"How is that?" she asked. "Didn't I guess pretty well?"

"Perhaps. But since you claim to know what I am seeking, it may be you can tell me where it is to be found?"

"It is not to be found. It is not hidden under the roof, but some one has it in their possession."

"Who?"

Before responding to this question, the girl changed position, and when she spoke again, it was in a changed and much more serious tone.

"Young man," she said, "you are on a very dangerous mission, be it what it may. If my suspicions are correct, that paper will lead you to a buried treasure, or something of the kind."

The young man started again.

"Others do not know of this paper. But they suspect

you of something, and you will be closely watched. If you do not lose your life in this rash undertaking, you will do well. It is an exciting time here now. An Indian shows his head at great peril, and a war may break upon us at any time. You are thought to be in league with the savages. I think you came to find this paper. If that is it, and the paper is yours, you can have it. Now, what do you say?"

"How shall I convince you?"

"If I have shown myself your friend, you need not fear to tell me what you will. I shall never betray your confidence."

The young man sat in silence a short time, and then he said :

"Lena, I will tell you what has brought me to this place, and if you will assist me, you shall be well rewarded. That paper is of no value to you, or any one else, save myself. If you place it in my hands, it will make us both comfortable for life."

"Comfortable for life! What do you mean by that?" she asked, almost dreamily.

Such a thought as had never entered the young man's mind came there now ; but without making any direct answer, he said :

"Listen, and you will understand. Six years ago my father went to California, with many other gold-seekers. He was successful—not, I imagine, in digging the gold himself ; but, in some manner, he accumulated a large sum, and two years later started upon his return, overland, with six others, having in charge a large amount of gold and paper. I say paper, because at San Francisco they had exchanged much of their metal for something representing the value, but not so bulky and difficult of transportation.

"These seven traveled with a large party till they reached a point some two hundred miles west of this, when some difficulty occurred, and they separated—my father's party thinking itself strong enough to go on alone. I will cut the story as short as I can, that you may understand what followed.

"The very first night one of the party was killed. How or by whom they could only surmise, though it was suspected that some stealthy savage did the deed. The next night they

posted three sentinels, but one of them was found dead on his post, his head crushed by a fearful blow from a billet of wood. You may well suppose that they began to be frightened at this, but there was no help for it.

"They moved on, after burying their fallen companion and continued their march through the greater portion of the night. But, while forming their bivouac, another of the number was killed. This time, one of their own party was strongly involved by circumstances, and he was charged with the crime.

"He did not deny it, but, on the contrary, avowed his guilt, and announced his determination to kill the whole party! He at once drew his pistols, and commenced firing upon them, wounding the three who still survived. He was himself shot through the body, and had an arm broken. Thus disabled, he fled from the spot, vowing vengeance.

"Of the two wounded men left behind him, one died before daylight, and the other evidently could not long survive. My father, too, was quite seriously wounded, so that it was decided to bury the treasure, which was accordingly done.

"In a few hours the other man died, and my father was left alone, weak from loss of blood, and fearful lest the desperado should return and utterly murder him.

"He carefully covered the *cache*, that no intruder might dig up the fatal treasure, and then left the spot. He walked but a little way before he fell in a fainting fit, induced by the loss of blood, and lay there, half dead, for some hours. But, as good luck would have it, a friendly Indian chanced to find him, and took care of him till he was better, and then conducted him to *this place*! He was surprised to find the wounded murderer already here, but could not leave at once, owing to his low condition.

"He was taken to the room that I now occupy, and all possible care was apparently bestowed upon him. But within a few minutes after eating, he felt a strange sensation, and knew that he had been drugged.

"Upon a piece of paper he had made a rude chart of the spot where he had buried the money; and fearing lest there was some design to rob him of that, he put it away in some

crevice about the room—it seemed to him under the roof. But, owing to his weak and bewildered condition, he could not state positively in regard to the place.

"He lost all consciousness—as I came near doing just now—and, when he recovered, found himself cast out, he knew not where, and left to die from exposure. But he did not die, and eventually reached home, though he has never recovered from the injuries he then sustained.

"Probably you can now imagine that I am here hoping to find that chart, and recover this treasure. I have already secured the services of Blue Belt, and if I had this paper, which is probably in your possession, I should take myself away from this dangerous place forever."

"And if I give you that paper—what then?"

"I can accomplish my undertaking, and render my invalid father comfortable for the rest of his life."

"Bah! You are a down-easter! If the paper isn't good for any thing to you, I'll keep it."

"Then you have it I will pay you well for it when I return."

"Pay me! I want no pay—what would it profit me in this place? But I want a favor done me."

"Any thing you say—no matter what it is," Charles answered, impulsively.

The thought of obtaining this paper which he felt must be of such importance in the prosecution of his dangerous and uncertain enterprise, made him a little careless in regard to the terms used.

The girl seemed to hesitate for a few moments, and then, bending nearer to Charles, and speaking in a whisper, she said:

"Take me away from this place!"

"Why, my girl, I supposed you liked this kind of life."

"I used to, but—but I don't any more."

"When shall I take you—and how?"

"Now—we can leave the place as we are, and no one will find us."

Marline did not reply at once. This was something quite unexpected to him, and it promised to interfere seriously with his other plans. But he must obtain that paper, at any price.

"Well!"

It was Lena who spoke, and the tone of her voice indicated that she was anxious to hear the answer.

"What shall I say to her?" Charles asked himself.

Then he added, aloud:

"I can not take you with me now, Lena, for it would cost us all our lives, no doubt. But when I come back I will see what can be done."

"I want to go now—I don't want to stay here any longer," she said.

"But, you must see that you can not go away into the wilderness and stay there without shelter or food while we search for a buried treasure. It may take many days to find it."

"Yes," the girl said, despondingly. "I will wait. I will take your promise, and if you forget it, and leave me here in this wicked place, you will do only what I expect."

There was something in the girl's tone which touched the young man deeply, and he answered quickly, taking her hand in his own:

"You need not fear that, Lena. As I live, I will not forget you, nor leave you here. I owe you too much to disregard my promise in that way. Can not you trust my word?"

"Yes, I must trust you—I do," and she arose slowly to her feet. "But come, it is dangerous for us to stay here. Let us go in. Here is the paper!"

She thrust a crumpled parcel into his hand, and then they left the spot, moving stealthily toward the house from which they had emerged.

Lena had almost placed her hand upon the latch when the door was quickly thrown open, and the form of Bawny Corrol appeared. His gaze first rested upon the girl, whom he grasped by one arm, at the same time exclaiming, in low tones:

"So, you jade, here you are, eh? What are you doing at this time of night? Who's this with you? Oh, it's that baby-face! Confound him—I'll soon settle up his business for him!"

Charles felt an impression that the enraged host was brandishing some kind of a weapon, and instinctively stepped behind an empty whisky-barrel which stood there, while he produced his own revolver.

"Go, Charles, quick!" exclaimed Lena. "Go, don't stop a moment!"

Before he could have fled, had he wished to do so, a pistol shot rung out upon the night, and the bullet took refuge in the empty cask.

The young man hesitated a moment. He could have shot the treacherous host from where he stood, but his better nature revolted. Then, too, he heard the rapid approach of other feet, and knew that if he would leave the spot, it must be done speedily.

During the time he had been in the vicinity he had marked well the "lay of the land," and consequently knew in which direction he ought to fly. So that after he had decided to seek his own personal safety, he lost no time in doing so.

"What's the row?" demanded Tom Taylor, gaining the side of the landlord.

"Look and see if you can find any thing of that baby-face out there," was the brutal answer. "I've learnt him a lesson, I think."

A search was made, but no "baby-face" was found, and while Tom and his chums were instituting a more thorough exploration, Bawny Corrol, still maintaining his grasp upon the arm of Lena, dragged her into the house.

CHAPTER V.

LENA CORROL.

DRAGGING her into a small room where a candle was still burning, Bawny threw the maiden upon a chair, and turned the key in the door. Then, placing himself near her, while the fiendishness of a demon seemed depicted upon his features, he hissed forth :

"Now let's know what all this means!"

As revealed by the pale glare of the candle, Lena was majestic at that moment, humble as was her position. In form she was rather small, being below the medium height of wo-

men, with a well-built and symmetrical frame. Notwithstanding her very plain dress, she appeared decidedly pretty, and her pale face showed signs of energy and determination, which the brutal landlord could by no means overcome. She gazed calmly into his face as the savage demand was made, and then answered in a low but unwavering voice:

“What do you wish to know about?”

“About what you’ve been doing to-night! Where you’ve been with that young man, and all about it!”

The words came forth with a jerk, and it was plainly to be seen that the speaker did not mean to let the matter drop till he had frightened the whole truth from the girl.

A moment he watched, and as she did not reply, he burst forth again, with renewed fury:

“Why don’t you answer? You know very well that this chap took enough *medicine* to do the job for him! You know, too, why it did not work. Now speak out.”

“I do not think your ‘medicine’ is sure to work during a thunder storm,” she replied, without once removing her eyes from the man.

The landlord appeared agitated in a moment, and once or twice his passion seemed prompting him to seize the poor girl, and choke her to death. But he refrained, and after struggling with his passion for some time, burst forth again.

“You minx—you impudent hussy—I’ve a good mind to shake you to pieces! You have got to meddling too much with my business. I shan’t stand it any longer. If ever you cross me again you’ll repent it—let me tell ye that, so there’ll be no mistake about it. You’ve shown your ugly disposition to me several times, of late, and it never will go down. I’m your—your—”

“You are my—what?”

It was a strange sight to see, this girl so calm and defiant before the brutal man whose hands were no strangers to human blood. He stopped for a moment, and then broke out, still more brutally:

“Well, you know. Your father died here, and left you for me to take care of. His last words were for me to raise you as my own child. And I’ve tried to; but it’s very little encouragement I have to do any thing for you. I’ve good

reason to think this feller's in league with the Injins; but when I try to find out, you jine right with him, and help him away. If we're all murdered by 'em, some night, it will be your fault."

He paused for a moment, and then added :

" If Tom Taylor don't find this chap and bring him back you'll be the one to answer for it. Do you understand that ?

" I hear what you say."

" Well, you're not a fool, so I guess you can understand it. Now go to bed, and in the morning you will hear further from me."

The girl arose, without a word, and retired to the little apartment in which her few sleeping hours were passed.

When she had gone, Bawny Corrol clenched his hard fists, and smote them together savagely.

" If I was only SURE!" he hissed, between his set teeth. " But, no matter—I'll try the thing on, and no one will be the wiser for it, if every thing does not work as we anticipate."

Lena entered her little room, and dropped wearily upon the very plain couch which stood at one side, moaning, as she did so :

" Must I always remain here with these brutes? All men are not so. My father was kind and good; this stranger is kind and—yes, he must be what is called a nobleman. Oh, if he will take me away from this place, how much I will do for him! I will work early and late, morning and night, if I can show him how happy he has made me. And I will try so hard to be good, so that he shall not be ashamed of me."

The thought of a happy future, in the midst of civilized society, was too deep for her to entertain unmoved, vague though her ideas of it were. She gave way to a flood of tears, tears of joy and sorrow combined, and then weary nature overcame her, and she fell asleep.

Early the next morning Lena was up, and busy with her duties, which were neither few nor light. A group of sour and ugly visages gathered at the breakfast table. Tom Taylor had found no traces of Charles Marline, but he had pondered the matter in his mind until he had reached some very

decided conclusions, and when breakfast was over he sought an interview with the landlord, where none could overhear.

The result was that Tom made some hasty preparations, and with two comrades, willing tools for any purpose which he might plan, left the place for an absence of some days.

When he had gone, Bawny left the bar in charge of a trusty diller, and called Lena from the kitchen, where she was at work, to a more retired room.

"Now, my girl," he said, when they were seated, "I want to talk over matters with you so that we both shall understand them as long as we live. Now I want to know what you have meant by acting as you have done in times past. Come, speak out—let me know!"

The poor girl looked at the floor a moment, as though to gather strength for the ordeal, and then, looking up calmly into Corrol's face, said :

"You know, Bawny Corrol, that I have always been faithful here, working all my strength would bear, and often more, for the home I have had here with you. If I have prevented you from doing a crime, it was not from any ill-will to you—it was to save you from the guilt."

"Oh-ho! So you've turned preacher, have you? Well, no matter about that. I've got some old books of sermons, and I can read one, when I feel like takin' that kind of a dose. You needn't let your feelings trouble you any more *that* way. I've come to tell you some news, so that you can be thinkin' of something more profitable."

"Some news—what is that?"

"Oh, nothing of consequence. Only that you are going to be married!"

"MARRIED!"

"Well, I don't know that there's any thing so very strange in *that*. You are old enough, and I want you married, so that *your husband* can take care of you. To tell the truth, I think you wouldn't be quite so troublesome if you had a husband."

He paused with a triumphant leer. Lena sat pale and trembling, unable to speak. Ordinarily she had little fear of the cruel man, even when he went so far as to beat her, but this

was something utterly new, and in its nature so appalling, that she knew not what to say or think.

"Well, you don't say any thing, so I think you must be pleased with the plan," continued Bawny, after a considerable silence.

"You do not tell me who I am to marry?" Lena found strength to say.

"You will marry Tom Taylor," was the reply, in slow, fearful tones.

An instant change came over the late quailing girl. She sprung to her feet, and while the fire of invincible determination flashed from her eyes, she exclaimed:

"No, I never will marry him! You can not force me to such an act. Sooner than live the wife of a degraded ruffian like him I would kill him, or kill myself. Weak girl though I am, I fear death less than life with such a monster!"

It was the landlord's turn to be abashed now, and for some moments he did not say a word. He waited till the impulse which had nerved Lena had reacted somewhat, leaving her weak and trembling, and then he said, very plausibly, and with no appearance of unkindness:

"Don't be hasty, my gal. I thought you'd like the chance of marrying Tom. He isn't the poor fellow we have supposed him to be. He has a large treasure buried, somewhere not far from here, and he has gone for it now. When he comes back he will be richer than all the other men within many miles of this place, and you can live like a fine lady. But you needn't marry him unless you wish to. You can take your choice between him and another. I always wanted to please you, though you never seemed to care for my gratification very much."

"Another—who is that?"

"Myself, Lena. Would you rather be my wife than Tom's?"

The look of scorn and disgust which passed over the maiden's face would have been answer enough for any man, and Bawny Corrol understood it perfectly well. He turned upon his heel, clenching his hands, quite livid with rage, and when he had composed himself sufficiently to put his thoughts into words, he hissed:

"I shan't talk to ye any more about it. Ye can take yer choice. When Tom comes back ye'll be his wife or mine, and if ye take me there won't need be any ceremony. Now ye understand it all, and *I mean jest what I say!*"

Shaking his fist in the girl's face, and giving emphasis to his words by a stamp or two, the brute turned from the room, ying, as he went:

"Now go back to yer work."

The girl remained alone in the apartment for a few minutes, and then she returned to her work, as though nothing ad happened. There might have been a shade of anxiety upon her face, and at times her movements betrayed absentness which might have been noticed. But all through the long day she drudged on, just as she had done for several years before.

In the evening preparations for the early breakfast were made, and then, weary and sad, she sought her little room.

It was rather late next morning when Bawny Corrol awoke, and he bounded out of bed with a curse.

"It's sunrise, and that girl isn't up yet!" he growled. "I'll learn her to lie abed that way!"

He was right. There were no signs of Lena, and he was presently thundering upon her door. But the room was quite unoccupied, as he found upon entering. The bed had not been in use during the night.

An alarm was given, search made, and presently some of her clothing was found upon the banks of the stream. But a close inspection convinced Corrol that she had not drowned herself.

"I was a fool that I didn't shut her up," he growled.

But no great matter. Thar's only one way she could go, and we'll easy enough bring her back."

A trusty man was sent off on horseback to scour the country, and bring her home when found; till which time Bawny sat down to wait the moment when he should again have his hands upon the frail girl who had dared to revolt from his authority.

But late at night the man came back, terribly weary and disappointed, cursing the luck which had attonded him. No

signs or traces of the missing girl could be found, and it was certain she had not passed out toward the settlements.

And Bawny Corrol, pondering the words she had spoken, was finally compelled to think that she must have destroyed her life

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE WILDS.

"I'm blamed if I know just whar the spot is I want to find. It is here somewhar about, but for the life of me I can't tell. No idee things had changed so. I thought I could hev come here the darkest night ever was, and put my foot right on the spot, but here I've been lookin' tew hours, and no nearer it than I was before."

It was Tom Taylor, standing upon an elevation far out in the unexplored wilds west of Silver City, who thus spoke, or rather mused aloud, for no one was at hand, though one of his companions was not far away, engaged in dressing a rabbit which he had shot. Tom was looking around with earnest, searching glances, scratching his burly head and cursing himself in vexation at his inability to solve the problem which perplexed his meager mind.

"Truth is, I didn't pay any great attention to the lay of the land at that time, and didn't have any particular fancy for the place, since it war gittin' hot; but I don't see how I could forget so much of every thing about it. That's whar sets me. But it was in this vicinity, and *they* hain't been here—so much is certain."

He walked away toward the spot where his companion, having prepared the game, was now building a fire.

"Careful about your smoke, Rob," he said. "Don't want to make any more than necessary. I most wish we'd looked around for some place not quite so open as this."

"Hope yer ain't afeard of the reds," growled the one called "Rob," evidently not relishing any interference in his matters.

"No; reds and I have a very good understandin'," ~~re~~ turned Tom. "But we're huntin' somethin' else, and by way of caution I'll jest say that, if we want to come out ahead, we've got to play our cards most mighty keerful—I'm satisfied of that."

Rob Mifflins gave vent to a spiteful expression, and kicked ~~at~~ the fire which he had just built.

"Yer kin fix it to suit yerself," he exclaimed, angrily; "but blame me if I'm goin' to stay here and be starved to death, any fool's errand!"

For a moment it seemed as though Taylor intended to rush upon his confederate, and tear him to pieces; but, thinking better of the situation, he said, in very conciliatory tones:

"Hush, Rob, we can't afford to quarrel. I don't want you to think I am out here for nothin'; you'll see when we git through with it. I tell you there's more real morey dependin' on the next few days than you or I could earn in a lifetime! What do you think of that?"

"Is that true?"

"Yes, Rob, that *is* true; and if we don't play our keerds keerful, and git it, somebody else will take it right out from under our noses."

"But what does it all mean?" asked the other, now fully alive to the interest of the occasion. "I never heard any thing of that kind before. Tell us all about it, will you?"

"Can't do it now, Rob. But you shall know all about it in good time. Where is Eben?"

"Hasn't come back yet. Maybe he has struck a trail, or somethin'. There, he is comin' now."

"So he is, and somethin' is wrong. See, his head is all blood!"

"So it is. Wonder what he run afoul of."

"Can't tell. Signal him this way, and then git out of sight. No knowin' what that may mean, and we must take care of ourselves."

The man did as directed, and when he had attracted the attention of Eben Shay, the twain moved behind an elevation of land, where they would be secure from the observation of any one who might come in pursuit of their companion.

To give our own version of Shay's disaster, it will be necessary that we again change the scene.

Perhaps a mile and a half from the location of the last incident, stood a very humble cabin. It was, in fact, of the poorest description, though much care seemed to have been bestowed in making it habitable and comfortable. Built entirely of small poles, notched together at the corners, it had been covered and re-covered with coats of mud, to fill the various chinks, until it looked very like a mere hut of earth. Yet all about it was neat and cozy, and an air of comfort seemed to pervade the humble dwelling which might not accompany residence in a palace.

Within there seemed the same neatness and painstaking as on the outside. The floor, of smoothly-trodden earth, had been neatly swept, and every one of the few rude articles of furniture was in its place.

A little chimney had been built at one side of the cabin, and bending over the fireplace was the only inmate of the dwelling—a small, white-haired old man. He was clothed in rude garments, evidently made by his own hands from the skins of such animals as he had been able to trap, while all around were indications of feebleness and failing power, both of body and mind. With a few sticks and dry twigs from the forest around, the old man was making efforts to revive the little fire still smoldering upon the ashes.

His attempts were successful at length, and with a great sigh of relief he rose from his stooping position, and turned toward the open door of the cabin. He was surprised to find that he was not alone.

A young man, a very boy in appearance, had crossed the dividing line which could not be called a threshold, and stood regarding the old man with surprise.

The new comer was below the medium stature, not particularly robust in build, beardless, and with a delicacy of feature which, but for the keen fire of the sharp gray eye, might have been considered almost feminine. He carried a rifle, and other weapons peeped forth from beneath his coarse gray hunting frock.

The old man seemed almost alarmed, at first, but presently recovered his possession of mind, and advanced toward the

intruder. The latter uttered a kindly greeting, and extended his hand, which the old man grasped with a little hesitation.

"I don't know who ye are, for ye seem a stranger in these parts," he said, "but I reckin ye must be a friend."

"I am a friend," the young man replied. "Set your mind at rest on that score. I am a stranger here, and am looking for parties that I suppose to be somewhere in this vicinity. Have you seen any such?"

"I don't know who ye mean in particular," was the reply accompanied by a shake of the head. "But I hain't seen any man till you for many a day, 'less it be now and then an Injin."

"Then you haven't seen Tom Taylor—do you know Tom?"

"No, don't know anybody; not by the names anybody else calls 'em."

"Tom is a large, coarse-looking man, very strong and reckless in his manner."

"He hasn't been here, youngster."

"Has Blue Belt been here—or have you seen him?"

"Yes, six or seven days ago."

"Not since?"

"No."

"Nor you haven't seen any young man in this part since yesterday morning?"

"Not a one, I tell ye. But what in nater is the matter that yer so anxious about them? Have ye got lost? I wouldn't wonder if yer had, 'cause ye look purty young to be out here in these regions—more 'specially alone."

"No, sir, I am not lost. These men came on here ahead of me, and I am looking for them. Here, what is this you are telling me? There comes one of the men I am looking for, at this very moment!"

Some seventy yards away, just where the clearing about the hut ended, a man had emerged from the forest, and was cautiously approaching the cabin. He came slowly, and seemed anxious to obtain a glance at the inmates before coming too near. When the old man's eyes rested upon him, he turned to his visitor, saying:

"I never have see that man before, youngster."

There was such an air of sincerity in the words that the listener was by no means disposed to doubt their honesty.

"I don't want that man to see me," the youngster said, "and it is too late now to leave the cabin. Where can I hide?"

There was but one spot within those four walls where a man could for a moment have remained out of sight, and to this retreat the old man pointed. It was beneath the sleeping berth, which had been arranged upon a frame of poles at one side of the cabin. It was elevated some two feet from the ground, and under it the young man found no difficulty in stowing himself away.

Scarcely had he disappeared from sight when the intruder, none other than Eben Shay, stepped upon the scene. Seeing only a defenseless old man in the cabin, he entered boldly

"Haloo, old man," he sung out, "do you live here?"

"I live here, as you see."

"Who lives here with yer?"

"Nobody, sir. I'm alone in the world, all alone."

"I want to know if you've seen a young man and an Injin around here within the last few days," the not over-welcome interlocutor continued.

"No, sir, I have seen no Injin since Blue Belt went from here, three or four days ago."

"Nor ye haven't seen a young man."

"What kind of a young man do ye mean, friend?"

"A chap somewhat taller nor me—about the same—quite stocky, and sort of cityfied."

"No, sir, no such man has been here."

"Nor ye hain't seen any such?"

"No."

There was a momentary silence, and then the hunter continued:

"Never mind. If either the Injin or this feller come here don't say *I* have been around. Do you understand?"

"I hear what you have to say."

"All right. Now let'shev suthin' to eat, for I'm gettin' darned sick of this woods feed."

"I've nothing better than woods feed, myself," returned the old man. "But the land is full of game. If you'll shoot somethin', I have a fire here, and will be glad to help you cook it."

A prolonged whistle greeted the remark.

"Not if I know myself. See here, old stingy; you've got plenty already cooked, and I want a shake in. Besides, I've got a couple of hungry fellers, not fur from here, and I want something to carry them. Come, set down, or I shall help myself."

The ruffian at once set about rummaging the cabin, throwing the various articles which came in his way hither and thither, until at last the old man ventured a word of remonstrance.

The brute left his work to grasp the occupant by the throat, throwing him upon the floor, and choking him till it seemed he would destroy the little remnant of the old man's life.

But in the very midst of his brutality, the assailant received a furious blow upon the head, and before he could recover from the shock, another followed, knocking him to the earth, thoroughly stunned and bleeding.

The stranger youth, from his concealment, had witnessed the base attack upon his friend, and, creeping out as quickly as possible, he applied the stock of a pistol so vigorously that the bully relaxed his hold, while the blood began to flow freely from two considerable wounds upon his head.

The old man was so much injured and frightened that he could not speak, or even regain his feet, until assisted by the young man.

When his faculties were sufficiently restored, however, he bestowed a little kick upon the prostrate form, saying:

"Blame the confounded critter! I never was so used afore by any person. He's worse than the Injins they tell so much about, for I've lived in peace with them these many years and never took any abuse from 'em. But, you've done me a right good turn, and one I'll be slow to forget."

The young man did not speak. He was considerably excited by the scene, though his movements were self-possessed. Taking the prostrate man's weapons, he knocked the priming from his rifle and pistols, wetting the charges so that there was no danger of immediate harm from his firearms. Then, grasping the still senseless form, he dragged it to the door, and tumbled it outside.

"So much for him," he said, speaking for the first time.

"Now, do you sit down here and rest, while I watch the scoundrel, and give him some good advice."

The old man was quite ready to heed the suggestion, for he could scarcely stand without help ; and the young man, having carefully capped his pistol, partially to make sure that it could not miss fire, and partially to calm his nerves took his stand close to the door.

In a short time the ruffian began to show signs of returning volition. He rose upon one elbow, at length, and glared upon the man who had checked his evil purposes.

"Come, take yourself away from here," the latter said, displaying his pistol, by way of emphasis. "I should have shot you, instead of what I did ; but go, and your worthless life will be saved."

"Talk of shootin' do ye ?" exclaimed the wretch, springing up with a cocked pistol in his hand. "Perhaps that is a game two can play at !"

He leveled his weapon deliberately at the breast of the young man, and pulled the trigger. There was a snap, but no report.

"Now go !" the youth exclaimed, in stern accents, presenting his own weapon.

The villain uttered a curse, thrust the worthless weapon into his belt, and slowly made his way from the cabin.

But at a few yards distance he paused, and earnestly asked :

"Who are you ?"

"That is no concern of yours—go on !" returned the youth.

Again the man turned to pursue his way, and again he halted at the margin of the forest.

"I know you !" he shouted ; "you will hear from me again !"

CHAPTER VII.

THE OLD MAN'S VOW.

"WHAT did he mean by that?" demanded the old man, leaving his seat, and moving toward the youth. "Who is the critter? Who are you? And what is there between ye that makes sech actions?"

"Which of your questions am I to answer first?" the person addressed returned, smiling at the strange earnestness of his aged interlocutor.

"Well, no matter. Tell me who *you* are. You've done me a proper service, but I don't know what to call you, arter all."

"My name is George Gregory."

"George Grig'ry! Do ye live anywhar about here?"

"I have no home, at present."

"No home! Why, land sakes! What are ye dewin' away out here, then?"

"I came here to look for this man—this one and some others. That is all I can tell you now. If you wish to know any more about me, wait, and you may know every thing you'd like to, some time."

"Well, that orter be enuff, though I'd like to know more, there ain't any denyin'. But ye'r a friend—I know that."

"Certainly, though I know no more of you than you just now knew of me."

"Well, well, I forgot I had not told ye who I be. My name is Jedd Stark. I've studied the use of roots and airbs a good deal, and understand purty well what's good for the human system. I always hed a great notion for life all by myself in the woods; and some years ago—a good many, now—I hed some little difficulty in the settlements, and came off here. I've lived here ever since. As I was saying, the Injins found out I knowed more than they did about roots and barks and airbs, and they come to me every little while for some kind of medicine. allus lived in peace with

em, and sometimes they dew me a real good service. I can't see now as I used to, to hunt and keer for myself, so they take a deal of care of me, though I suppose they must live much as fifty miles away, or more."

"That is very kind of the Indians, most certainly," returned George, breaking in upon what seemed to give promise of being an hour's talk.

"But there are some nearer neighbors now, it seems, who are not so friendly. Eben Shay will most likely be back here soon, with two other men, and they will neither care for your skill in roots nor your gray hairs. What will you do with them?"

"I leave it all to you, my young friend," was the immediate answer. "You know the men—do what you think best."

When Shay reached his comrades he related the cause of his bloody appearance, stating the fact of having discovered the old man's hut, and making application there for food. The remainder of the narration he varied to suit himself, averring that while peacefully making his wishes known he was attacked from behind, knocked down and maltreated.

Of course threats of vengeance were sworn at once. Eben was washed, the wound upon his head dressed somewhat, and then the party decided to go up at once and avenge the insult. Various were the plans laid down, and all arrangements were made for a bloody satisfaction.

But when they reached the spot, and crept up very carefully to the lone hut, just as the sun was sinking behind the distant mountains, they were surprised to find no traces of any person who inhabited it. There were a few articles of furniture, very many bundles of herbs and plants, quantities of bark and roots, but no living dwellers.

"Yer see," exclaimed Shay, with a voice of triumph, "they didn't dare to stay here after what they'd done to me."

"I see," pursued Mifflins. "But as they've gone and left this, why not make it our headquarters while we stay here-about?"

Both the others dissented from this proposition, Tom Taylor exclaiming, decidedly:

"All the use we can make of the hut is to burn it up. Won't that ease your headache, Eben?"

"That's what it will."

Ten minutes later the three men were moving back toward their former position, and just after they left the cabin a strong cloud of smoke poured forth, followed quickly by a jet of flame.

For a little time the forest glowed with the red firelight, then it faded away, and the humble home, which had cost the weak old man so many weary hours of toil, was a pile of smoking embers.

With the gathering of the night-shades, the old man returned, and gazed mournfully upon the ruins. He was alone. His step was weak and slow, but there was a singular determination in his eyes, and a spirit of vengeance in his words.

"I saw him—I know him!" he repeated, huskily. "*It is him!* But for this inhuman act I should never have thought of vengeance again. I am old, and a few days or weeks more will make little difference to me. If I die for it at once, I will finish that monster, *now!*"

Then, as though the very threat of vengeance had wearied him, he sat down near the ashes, still hot and smoking, and buried his face in his hands.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CACHE.

WHEN Charles Marline left the vicinity of Bawny Corrol's tavern, on the night of which we have spoken, he had no decided plan in mind, save to leave the dangerous place. But when this had been accomplished, and he began to feel safe personally, the question naturally rose, what further course should he pursue?

He had now the coveted chart, for which he had searched many hours in the attic room of the old tavern, and nothing

prevented his going on to make the search which he hoped would speedily bring him the valuable treasure.

So he gained a safe distance that night, though drenched to the skin by the wet bushes and weeds through which he was obliged, at times, to make his way, as well as by the constant dripping of the trees.

Finding at length a dry nook, he laid him down and slept for an hour or two, at the end of which time it was day-break. Only a few minutes after resuming his way, he was startled at beholding an Indian quite near, but his momentary alarm subsided into satisfaction when he found the red-man to be none other than his new-made brother, Blue Belt.

All that day and a portion of the next they marched on through the wilds, the Indian giving his friend many valuable lessons in woodcraft, which the latter very quickly comprehended.

On the afternoon of the second day they paused, and Blue Belt, pointing to the ground at his feet, remarked:

“Here!”

Charles understood that single word as fully as though a volume had been rehearsed.

That was the spot where, years before, Blue Belt had found his father in insensibility, and cared for him, and brought him back to life.

The young man trod the earth with a feeling almost of reverence for its associations. But in a few moments this sensation was lost in the realization that his actual task had now but just commenced.

This was the spot where his father had fainted from loss of blood and exhaustion, but how far, or in which direction, he had walked from the *cache*, not even that person himself had any distinct idea. There was only the rough chart to guide him, and indicate the spot where it should be found.

Acting upon the Indian’s advice, it was decided to devote the remainder of the afternoon to killing and cooking meat, take a good night’s sleep, and then set out upon a systematic hunt for the *cache*.

The Indian had a gun, knife and hatchet, like most of his people, while Marline had only a pair of revolvers, and a heavy sheath-knife. But it was no great task to shoot any

quantity of small game, and a fire, built in a cleft rock, served to prepare it.

This part of the programme, and the sound sleep for that night, was easily enough carried out. But this done, the task became one of great difficulty and uncertainty.

For two days Charles searched constantly, assisted by his Indian ally, but found nothing answering to the chart. Once or twice, during the time, he did fancy that the conformation called for by the draft had been found, but if he searched for any evidences of the *cache* he was undeceived, and so the search continued.

The third night passed somewhat gloomily, and the following morning he rose, wishing that he was safely at home with the treasure which he saw no prospect of finding. Nor could he keep his thoughts entirely from the patient Lena Corrol, who was no doubt anxiously waiting and watching for him to come and take her away from a life which had grown so distasteful to her.

He did not know that she had already taken herself away.

Their provisions were now quite exhausted, and while Blue Belt went to look for more, Charles, never losing sight of his principal object, strolled along, looking eagerly for any signs of the *cache*.

He had no great hopes now of finding it, even with the help of the coveted chart. But so accustomed had he become to searching for the spot, that he continued to stroll along, glancing around in every direction, lest some unnoticed combination should answer the ideal his brain had gathered from the crumpled paper.

Suddenly his foot struck something hard, and a white, spherical object was revealed. He partially turned it over, and saw a ghastly skull! For a moment only was he disconcerted, and then he proceeded to investigate. Right before him, half hidden by a growth of low bushes, lay an entire human skeleton! Portions of the clothing still remained, so that he had no difficulty in identifying the remains as those of a white man.

Surely such a discovery would have seemed no cause for rejoicing, but the young man's manner did change in a moment. He looked around with quick and earnest purpose,

for he had no doubt that this was one of the men who had been killed at the burying of the treasure. If this were the case, the *cache* could not be far distant.

Out came the chart once more, and the outlines were again perused, though every line there had been long since burned into his brain, never to be forgotten.

Yes, there was a rock, though of a very different appearance from the one he expected to find, and some of the other features seemed to be there, too. He moved around, taking the position which seemed laid down in the chart, and there it was, before him at last, though years had changed very materially the appearance which his invalid father had so often described.

What a thrill of emotion passed over his frame as he moved toward the gray stone! Was he on the verge of success, or did only another disappointment stare him in the face?

Yes, there was the smaller boulder which covered the treasure, and even now it was apparent that the earth beneath it had been disturbed.

Charles dropped upon his knees, for he seemed deficient in standing-strength, and rolled away the small stone. Then he commenced an immediate attack upon the earth beneath. He had only a miniature wooden spade, which he had formed with his knife in anticipation of this moment, but this was sufficient to throw aside the disintegrated earth.

Heedless of every thing surrounding him, the young man devoted himself to the task, scraping out the loose dirt, and gaining fresh assurances, each moment, that he was exploring the *cache* he had come to seek.

He was well at the work, and had just begun to expect that he might at any moment come to some more substantial proofs, when a movement sounded close beside him, and Blue Belt appeared.

He had no game, but the young man thought not now of that.

"I have found it, Blue Belt," he exclaimed, joyously.

"Oh, yes. Too bad. Me sorry!"

"Sorry; what in the—"

A signal of caution recalled the wild youth to his senses.

"You no talk so loud—we are watched," returned the Indian.

"Watched!" gasped the youth, "can it be? Where?"

By a careless motion the Indian pointed almost directly in advance. Charles glanced in that direction, and saw a sight which naturally enough filled him with alarm.

Rising from behind a thicket not more than fifty yards away, he beheld Tom Taylor, Eben Shay and Rob Mifflins, all with rifles ready for service, and looks of infernal delight up on their features.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Tom. "So, I've caught ye right in th' act?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" chorused the two satellites, mockin' ly.

Blue Belt had shrunk away, being fully prepared for the move, but Marline stood like one rooted to the spot, completely nonplussed at the position in which he found himself.

"Yer don't git away this time," the big villain continued, making preparations to fire. "If ye've got any prayin' to do, be quick about it."

Resting his face against the breech of his gun, Taylor paused a moment to take deliberate aim.

But he did not fire.

From the forest upon the left a single rifle-shot rung out, and then the desperado dropped his gun, with a bullet-hole through the breech. It was discharged by the fall, but the ball went wide, and hastily snatching up the damaged weapon, Tom sought the same safety for which his companions were already seeking.

In less than a minute the last of the trio had disappeared, gliding from tree to tree, and from one cover to another.

On looking around for his companion, Charles realized for the first time that he was alone. Blue Belt was standing behind a tree at some distance, with his gun in hand, and keeping a sharp look-out in every direction.

The young man hastened to his side.

"What was the meaning of that?" he asked.

The Indian shook his head.

"Can't say," he replied. "Me not well understand."

"The person who fired that shot must be our friend," persisted Marline.

Still Blue Belt shook his head.

"May be not so," he returned.

"What shall we do?" Charles asked.

"Come with me," and Blue Belt led the way toward a small ravine, not very far distant.

"But what will become of my treasure?" the young man exclaimed, in an agony of conflicting emotions. "Let me go back and get that—it would be only a few minutes' work."

"Get it—lose it," returned the Indian. "Must watch it now—take it out some time."

The savage then added some arguments of his own, to show the young man the danger of attempting any such feat as he contemplated—the bearing away in open daylight, and in the face of watchful enemies, a treasure of more value than many horses.

It seemed very vexatious to Charles, when the prize had seemed almost in his grasp, to be thus tantalized; but he could do no less than submit, consoling himself that in all probability none of the other parties, even if they knew his errand, would attempt to secure the treasure during daylight.

Crouching under the bank of the ravine, he thought all these matters over, and saw that his red friend was right. His safest course, most certainly, would be to seize the prize under cover of darkness, and make his way from that vicinity as rapidly as possible.

But, meantime, where was the friend that had fired the mysterious shot? If a friend indeed, why did he not appear, and satisfy the growing uncertainty?

"Do you stay here and watch the spot," he finally said to Blue Belt. "I am going on a scout."

He worked up along the ravine, crept out of it, and around behind a small hill, whence he could survey the forest for some distance each way, but he saw no person. The stillness of death seemed to reign on all sides, and he listened and looked in vain for any explanation of the mystery.

"I declare, I don't comprehend this," he muttered, still keeping up the sweeping search of his eyes. "If I was superstitious there would be some way of accounting for all these uncertain things; but ghosts, whatever else they may do, do not fire rifles. Somebody is lurking around here for a purpose, though whether it be good or bad, I've no particular idea."

Satisfied that himself and the Indian were now alone in that part of the country, whichever way the others might have gone, Charles hastened back to compare notes with Blue Belt.

After a little discussion, it was decided that Marline should remain in the vicinity during the forenoon, while the other went out to look for food, and also strove to make any discoveries which he might by care or accident.

When he had gone, Charles sought out a spot where it seemed no one could discover him without first exposing themselves, and where he could command a good view of all the region about. There he set himself down to watch and wait.

One long hour after another rolled by, each freighted with weariness, and it seemed to the young man that his Indian friend would never come. By his pocket compass he could see that it was now past noon, but no signs yet of any breakfast, or any friend.

Tom Taylor and his gang seemed to have left for good, and save the occasional movement of a wild animal, the place seemed a fitting abode for the skeleton which the young man had disturbed.

Finally, as the afternoon wore away, still bringing no Blue Belt, hunger began to call in earnest tones, and Charles decided to go out into the forest, at some distance from his present position, and attempt to shoot something with his revolvers.

But the purpose was not easily carried out. There was a scarcity of game in the immediate vicinity, and that which was to be seen seemed unusually wild. The young man wandered about for hours, quite unable to get within pistol-shot of any thing worth shooting.

Just as he was about giving up the search, and had begun to make his way back toward the spot where he left the prized *cache*, he was surprised at beholding evidences of former life in the vicinity, and very soon thereafter came out upon the ruins of Jddy Stark's former hut.

"So-ho," he remarked. "Somebody has been living here. Perhaps that explains the mystery of the morning."

While gazing at the remains, he had not noticed the ap

proach of Stark in person, and it was not till the feeble old man was almost within speaking distance that he was observed.

The old man was the first to speak.

"I don't think ye belong to *his* gang," he said; "ef I hed, I should have shot ye where ye stood!"

And the old man extended a rifle, the moderate weight of which seemed almost too much for his enfeebled frame.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SCENES CHANGED.

"I DON'T know whose gang you may mean," the young man returned, very composedly, "but I can assure you I belong to nobody but myself."

"I know ye don't belong to *them*," Stark continued, "for I marked every one of them by the light of my poor home, and some day I shall meet the whole gang, and clear up all these old scores. I owe *him* more than I can tell—but it will all be right, by-and-by!"

"Is it Tom Taylor's gang you are speaking of?" Charles demanded, a light coming over him.

"Ye're right, my man, parfictly right."

He was silent a moment, and then abruptly demanded:

"What shall I call your name, young man?"

"I am no friend of Taylor's," was the hesitating reply.

"Then I think your name must be *Charles Marline*! Am I right?"

The young man evinced considerable surprise. He felt even more.

"You are right," he said, frankly. "That *is* my name; and now, pray tell me how you knew or guessed it?"

"Oh, I knew nothing—I only knew a young man of that name was in these parts, so I supposed you must be the one."

"This was your home?" asked the young man.

"It was, sir."

"And Tom Taylor burnt it?"

"He did."

The poor old man related the scenes which had transpired at the visit of Shay, and subsequently, adding, very energetically :

"But that is not the first wrong this man has done me. Years ago a crime was laid to me that I never was guilty of and I only saved my neck by coming away here, many mil beyond where white men had ever trod. I should have been killed by the savages, but my knowledge of roots and airbs made me a kind of medicine-man for them, and so I lived in peace with 'em. But I'm going to hunt up this man, and pay him for all his villainy, if it costs my life. Life is worth very little, young man, when you get to my age."

As the old man ceased speaking, a sound came to the ears of Charles Marline which caused him to start, and leave the old man's side abruptly. It was the sound of voices, and their tone seemed that of imprecation.

More than this, he seemed to recognize the tones as those of Tom Taylor.

The forest was full of deep shadows, and any person might have glided through it without danger of attracting particular attention. Charles did so, though why, he could scarcely have told. From time to time he could still hear the voices, so that he did not require a guide, and presently stood where he beheld the whole scene.

And it was a strange sight which broke upon his vision.

Tom Taylor and his two villain companions had a fourth man in their power, and were evidently intent upon his death. A rope had been placed about his neck, and thrown over the limb of a tree, the end of which Tom held, and even at the moment when Charles first caught sight of the scene, he was lowering the doomed man to the ground, after having drawn him up to a considerable distance.

"Now will ye tell out the whole story?" demanded the great ruffian.

But his victim either could not or would not speak, and after a moment's waiting, the giant exclaimed again :

"If ye ain't goin' to speak, why, up ye go, and ye won't

come down ag'in this time, mind that! Are ye goin' to tell?"

There seemed to be no answer, for up went the pendant form again, this time with a vengeful energy which seemed to speak of a deadly purpose.

Charles, quite unobserved by the trio, who were too intent upon their bloody work to notice very closely what might be transpiring about them, had stolen up, until two vigorous springs put him within striking distance of the active murderer.

With a clubbed pistol, impelled by all the vigor of his arm, he struck the self-appointed executioner, the blow felling him as though he had been but a mass of clay.

The victim dropped to the earth, and Charles turned to the other two men, presenting the cold muzzle of a revolver to each.

So quickly had the whole transaction taken place, that they had scarcely realized his presence in their midst, before they found themselves confronted. Even the rifles upon which they were leaning had not been presented.

"Not a move, gentlemen, till this thing is explained," he said, in tones not to be mistaken. "If you do, you are dead men!"

For one moment they gazed at the cold iron tubes and the muscular young man who held them; then both turned and dashed away into the forest.

Charles allowed them to depart, for he had no wish to shed blood if it could be avoided, and he well knew Taylor to be the principal in the deed. It was not probable that the condition of his head would allow him to join in other plans for villainy that night.

While he was busy releasing the young man from his unpleasant position, Charles was somewhat surprised to see his aged acquaintance, Jddy Stark, making his way to the spot. The old man apparently took in the situation at a glance, for he said, pointing his finger to Taylor:

"Take a piece of that rope, and tie this man well. Then leave him to me. I want to take care of him."

Having released George Gregory, for he was the victim, as the reader has rightly supposed, and finding that he was not

injured beyond a most uncomfortable choking, Charles turned his attention to Tom, who still lay quite devoid of motion. A portion of the rope, skillfully applied, left him powerless to inflict any further injury, even if in possession of his full powers of body, which being done, he was placed beside a tree, and left to himself.

Young Gregory was suffering considerably, and some water was needed, that the cruel rope-cut about his neck might be bathed. Charles looked about in perplexity.

"If we could have some water," he said, inquiringly

"That you can," returned Stark. "Go right up to where my cabin stood, and to the east, not ten rods, you'll find a running stream. Take my cap and get it."

Charles grasped something which promised to answer the purpose, and hastened away. It was not very far to the spot, and he readily found the stream. But, upon filling the cap he had taken, he found it quite useless, and that he might as well have taken a sieve for that purpose.

Here was a quandary. His own was no better, nor had he any thing about him which would answer. But even then he recollects having seen a small-sized iron vessel in the pile of ruins where Jddy's hut had stood, and to obtain this was his first purpose.

He found it quite readily, though the gloom was now gathering, and found that it answered all requirements.

One hasty swallow of the priceless Beverage, and he sped back upon his mission of mercy.

But on reaching the spot, he found himself anticipated.

The entire party had disappeared!

It was not a mistake on his part, for there could be none. Here was the identical tree against which he had placed Tom Taylor, but the giant was no longer there. There was the spot where George Gregory had been carefully seated, but no young man was to be seen. Even the old avenger had disappeared altogether.

Charles Marline placed his vessel of water upon the ground, and gave the earth a close scrutiny. No marks of blood, or traces of conflict were to be seen, except where the attempt at execution had taken place, nor could he discover any decided trail leaving the spot.

On the whole his astonishment and perplexity were unbounded. What was he to do? Should he attempt to follow, and ascertain the fate of the old man and boy? It was near night, and would soon be quite dark. The probabilities of his success were very meager, indeed. Then his treasure. It was already getting dusk, and if he delayed longer it might be impossible to find the *cache*.

The last thought decided him. He would hasten to the *cache*, secure his treasure, and either conceal it elsewhere and seek for further light regarding this mysterious affair, or hasten back toward civilization, stopping for Lena Corrol as he went.

Shaping his course according to the best of his judgment, he hurried away through the forest as rapidly as consistent with reasonable precaution.

Night fell fast in the forest depths, so that before the young man had reached the place he sought it was difficult to distinguish any thing, save where the wood was quite open. But at length he did find the locality of the *cache*, and when assured that he was right, hastened up to the side of the rock.

Just at that moment his heart gave a painful thump. Some one had been there before him! The dirt had been excavated to a considerable extent, and without any question, the treasure had been taken!

Yes, such was the fact, for there he could see where some bundle, wrapped up in a small compass, had been pressed into the earth, and lain for years; but it was gone now, and just as he had so nearly succeeded in getting it into his own possession!

It is impossible to convey any idea of the feelings experienced by Charles Marline. Rage, disappointment and shame were among the principal. It was chiefly against himself that this anger was directed. If he had but remained at his post, watching the spot instead of yielding to the demands of hunger, he might now have been the possessor of a fortune.

But somebody had profited by his negligence. Who was the person?

In an instant his suspicions ran to Blue Belt. He believed that person alone knew of the buried treasure, and why had he not returned, as by agreement he should have done, if he

had not been waiting for some such opportunity? If Tom Taylor, or the young stranger, George Gregory, knew of the *cache*, as Taylor of course did know, they were at such a distance that any probability of their having been engaged in the theft seemed extremely remote.

But the treasure, if any had been there, was gone; and whoever had taken it, there seemed little use for the young man to ever again expect to obtain any clue to its whereabouts. Why then should he longer remain where danger and lawlessness so generally abounded?

He felt a great inclination to set forth at once, travel as far as he could during the night, and push on the following day, that he might lose no time in getting out of the wilderness. This disposition had half taken a form of determination, when something like a step sounded behind him. Turning quickly he found himself face to face with the very person he never again expected to encounter—Blue Belt.

And close behind that personage came half a dozen Indian hunters.

CHAPTER X.

ON THE TRAIL.

For a moment Charles stood with revolvers ready for a desperate strife, anticipating some hostile demonstration from the red-men. But as none was made, he began to think better of it, and asked of Blue Belt:

"Where have you been?"

The Indian then proceeded in his own way to tell his story. On going out in the morning he had searched some time for game. But nothing of any size presenting itself, he went on, till some miles from the *cache*. Here he struck the trail of a hunting-party of his people. The thought of following them and procuring assistance at once possessed his mind, and without returning to acquaint Charles with his purpose, he set off upon their trail.

Not till near noon did he overtake them, and then it re-

quired considerable persuasion upon his part to induce them to undertake the errand he wished. In this he was finally successful, after he had accompanied them to their camp; and now he had arrived with half a dozen trusty Indians, plenty of food, and guns enough for a fight, if need be.

All this would have interested Charles very much had there been any occasion for their services—had the treasure been in his possession. As it was, he could only feel impatient that they had not come sooner, and so exclaimed, half petulantly.

"It's too late! every thing is lost!"

"How you mean lost?" asked the Indian.

Charles explained that, urged by hunger, he had left his post for a time, and, on returning to unearth the treasure, was horrified to find it gone.

The savage received the announcement very calmly.

"Braves follow trail very fast," he said, and pointed to the warlike array standing in grim silence behind them.

A new hope took possession of the young man's mind. If Tom Taylor, or any of those concerned with him in the scene of violence which Charles had interrupted, had taken the treasure, it might still be possible to follow them up, and obtain it.

He related the occurrence to Blue Belt.

That worthy signified a wish to be led to the spot, and away the party went through the forest, gliding like so many shadows.

The place was found without difficulty, and was precisely as the young man had left it, even the little iron kettle of water remaining where he had placed it on finding those gone for whose use it was intended.

A few words passed between the Indians, and then they set out in different directions, moving through the forest as silently as so many ghosts. Blue Belt was the last to leave, but he went, requesting Charles to wait a short time.

None of the Indians were long absent. Within twenty minutes all had returned, and gathered in a circle upon the ground. Their deliberations, interspersed with generous smoking, were long and tedious, so that Charles, who was all anxiety and impatience, began to think they would never end.

But finally the council broke up; the savages began to unpack their food, and Blue Belt informed the young man that the warriors proposed to rest through the night, take the trail with the coming of morning light, and pursue it till the party of white men was found.

Sentinels were posted, that no foe might steal upon them, unobserved, and the night passed quietly, though Charles slept but little. His mind was too full for quiet rest. He could not help wondering what the end of this series of complications would be. But he could not solve the problem, and so he strove to dismiss it, and sleep. In that he was partially successful at last.

Before morning light the Indians were astir, and had prepared their breakfast, such as it was. Scouts were sent out to take observations, and preparations made for pushing the pursuit most vigorously.

No sooner was it possible to follow the trail than the red-men set off, Charles falling in the rear, and watching carefully all the methods by which they detected the passage of those they sought. It was one of his first practical lessons in trail-hunting, and there was no knowing how soon he might require to be proficient.

But there were few occasions for the exhibition of supreme skill. The trail was quite distinctly marked, no particular pains having been taken to cover it, so that even Charles was enabled to decide pretty nearly that the party had consisted of but four persons walking, and these he supposed to be Shay, Mifflins, Gregory, and the old man. The deeply-indented tracks of the two larger feet showed that they had carried the body of their disabled leader.

But one circumstance caused the young man quite a manifest uneasiness. Instead of leading back toward civilization, these tracks headed directly toward the higher and wilder portions of the hills, showing very evidently that the party had a haunt of some kind there, in which they would be entirely at home, and have a most decided advantage over those who followed them.

But even this fact did not deter the young man. He wished to fathom, if possible, the mystery of the preceding night, and to avert from the mere boy, George Gregory, the

fate which Tom Taylor evidently intended to inflict upon him. The trail led in difficult ways, up sharp ascents and through tangled wilds, which it required much caution and skill to penetrate. The ground was constantly growing more broken ; huge rocks were scattered on all sides, and many fallen trees, torn down by the frequent storms.

At length all further progress seemed effectually cut off. A rugged, frowning cliff rose directly in front of them, and toward it the trail led.

The Indians pursued it cautiously, Charles and Blue Belt being in advance.

Suddenly, from a dark cleft, high up in the face of the ledge, came two bright flashes, two sharp reports, and one of the Indians dropped to the ground, shot through the body.

Beyond doubt this missile had been intended for Charles, since it passed so close as to graze his cheek, inflicting a painful, though not otherwise serious, scratch.

Blue Belt, too, had been an especial target for the unseen marksmen, as a bullet-wound in his arm attested.

Almost before the reports had died away, every Indian that could do so had taken to cover, and Charles was left standing alone beside the dying savage.

The young man did not wish to seek cover. Unprovoked and cowardly as had been the attack, he was anxious to know more before putting himself in deadly hostility to those men. And more than that, he wished them to understand that he was not alarmed at the sound or smell of powder.

Taking from his pocket a handkerchief he held it aloft, saying as he did so :

"Come out, traitors, and let us know who you are, and why you fire thus upon unoffending men?"

There was a short silence, and then a voice from the rock replied :

"Your Injins will shoot, if we give them a chance."

"No wonder your conscience troubles you, Eben Shay," the young man returned. "But you need not feel so alarmed. I will be surety that the Indians will not molest you now unless you further provoke them."

"I don't believe it," growled the voice. "You know who we are; what more do you want?"

"I know *your* voice," replied Charles. "But who is with you, and why are you there?"

"No matter who is with us. We are here to cure Tom's heel that you broke last night. Now, does that satisfy you?"

"Not quite. Why did you shoot at these men?"

"They did not so come. Why did you attempt to shoot me when at the *cache*, yesterday morning?"

"We did not care to shoot you—only wanted you to get out of the way, and let us have the treasure."

"What treasure?"

"Perhaps you were digging for it, without knowing! I guess not!"

"Did you get it?"

A consultation seemed to take place inside, and then the voice replied :

"Yes; don't you wish you had it, yourself?"

"It is false, they haven't got it!" exclaimed a voice from within.

That this was the voice of one of the prisoners, there could be no doubt. And most surely it was not the old man. Consequently, it must be the boy.

The supposition was heightened by what seemed the sound of blows and tumult from within. Presuming upon what he supposed, as well as some things which he knew, Charles continued :

"Why do you keep that boy with you? What has he done?"

It was some moments before any response was made, and then Eben Shay and Rob Mifflins appeared upon the cliff, the former holding George Gregory before him as a shield, the latter covering himself in like manner with Jddy Stark. Both those last named had their hands bound, and bore marks of rough usage.

Eben Shay, as hitherto, continued to do the speaking.

"Now ye see us," he said, "all of us, and know who'se here. I ain't goin' to stand here and gab any longer. We 're what ye can't git tew us, and your best way is to go along and attend to yer own concerns."

"I am attending to my own concerns," Charles responded

"I had a quantity of treasure *cached* not far from here. I have been robbed of it, and you confess to the robbery. Unless it be forthcoming you need never expect that I shall leave you. It is my property, and I have a right to its recovery."

"That's true," returned the other. "But we don't happen to have it. This 'ere youngster has got the gold, and he won't tell what he's done with it. That's what we were stringin' him fer last night. We wanted to make him tell what he'd done with it, so we could bring it to you."

"'Tis false," exclaimed Gregory. "They came here to rob you—I came to prevent them!"

"Who are you?" Charles asked.

The youth seemed to shrink somewhat from Marline's steady gaze, and cast down his eyes in confusion. But presently he said:

"My name is Gregory, and I am your friend. It was for that they tried to kill me!"

"You lie!" screamed Shay, grasping him by the throat, and shaking him violently.

Could Charles have fired at the brutal Shay without violation of his honor, he would most assuredly have done so, since, whether the boy spoke the truth or not, the action of his persecutor was so utterly defiant of all principles of humanity that Charles experienced a strong desire to send a bullet in his direction.

This feeling seemed to be more than suspected by the desperadoes, for Rob Mifflins demanded, impatiently:

"Come, what are you waiting for now? If you've stood there with that white rag in your hand long enough, it is time you took yourself off among your Injins. Maybe you think it a funny idee to jine yourself with red-skins, and make war on white men; but you won't find it so, if you live to get back among the settlements. But don't you lay awake o' nights, for I don't think there is much danger of your gettin' back!"

A brutal laugh accompanied this sally of wit, and under its cover the party withdrew once more to their rocky fastness. Seeing plainly enough that nothing could be accomplished, by way of treaty or reason, Charles restored his handkerchief to its former receptacle, and turned away.

Scarcely had he done so when a pistol was discharged from

the cliff, the bullet passing close to his shoulder and striking a rock directly in front of him. This cowardly shot was answered by a general volley from the Indians, who had taken positions among the rocks and bushes, after the manner of their people; and, in fact, the manner of white men differed very little.

Blue Belt had retired some little distance to the rear, and with another brave was dressing his damaged arm as carefully as circumstances would allow.

But he was thirsting for revenge.

Charles took a seat beside him, and they discussed the course to be taken in prosecuting the work they had in hand. The conclusions reached were something like this:

Plainly they could not hope to penetrate the recess or cavern in which the party had taken refuge, while daylight rendered their movements visible. What might be accomplished under the cover of darkness remained to be seen. But the besieged party could have neither food nor water, certainly not the latter, and must soon come forth for it. If they did not, meantime, kill their prisoners, it might be as well to wait the result. But George and the old man would naturally suffer most. For this reason the more urgent attempt should be made to effect their release. And for their sakes, great care should be exercised in firing toward the ledge.

Two or three of the band were sent to search for any other passage leading to the retreat, but very soon they returned, reporting no possibility of any other approach.

So no resort remained but to wait patiently while the long hours of the day wore away, hoping that the night might bring some variety—some means of setting free the captives, and of punishing and capturing the criminals who now held them.

CHAPTER XI.

BEHIND THE SCENES.

IT now becomes necessary to return to George Gregory and his companions, at the time Charles left them in pursuit of water, as related in a previous chapter.

Shay and Mifflins did not run far when they left the scene of the attempted execution. No sooner were they safely out of sight of the young man, than a halt was called by mutual consent, and they began to deliberate in regard to their further movements.

Of course they had no intention of leaving Tom Taylor in other hands than their own, so long as there was any danger of his meeting deserved treatment, their only anxiety being not to meet the muzzles of those unpromising revolvers.

Accordingly they began creeping back toward the place, intending to spring upon Marline with a *coup de grace*, after which they could dispose of the others at leisure. Fate seemed to help them, for, as they came near, the young man left the place, and from his parting words they gathered his purpose.

Jeddy Stark was bending over the unconscious Tom, full of joyful anticipations of coming gratification, when he felt himself grasped from behind and disarmed, while a hoarse voice exclaimed in his ear :

"Don't ye say a loud word! If ye do, yer head comes off!"

A long knife was flashed before his eyes, and the same savage speaker continued :

"Take hold of Tom's legs and help carry, or I'll cut yer wiz n!"

His death would have availed nothing, and staggering to and fro under the weight, which was almost greater than he could support, the poor old man carried Tom's feet as best he could, while Mifflins tugged along bearing his monstrous body.

Eben Shay threw the lighter form of George Gregory over his shoulder, and in this manner the place was vacated, almost before Marline's footsteps had died away in the distance.

Before they had gone far, the old man's strength gave way entirely, and he fell to the earth, rising to his feet again with some difficulty. But George was somewhat recovered now, and could walk, so Shay and Mifflins took up their damaged leader, and compelled the boy and old man to walk between them, one upon each side of the insensible form.

Stopping frequently to rest, they kept on in this way until darkness began to shut in the forest. Then the prisoners were tied to each other and the burden, so that they could by no means escape, and on they still went through the darkness. Jddy knew of the existence of a cavern in the hills, as he confessed, and was obliged, under threats of death, to guide them toward it. He did so, and finally, when the party was utterly exhausted, it was reached.

The prisoners were then tied separately, so that they could not assist each other to freedom, and after a momentary rest, the two men devoted all their energies to bringing Tom back to a conscious condition.

This was not easily done. The stars peered in through the rocky clefts, seeming to watch the work for a time, and then sunk from sight, but still the men paused not, for not yet had they any evidences of the return of active life to their comrade.

But earth was not yet to be rid of the villain. His senses returned slowly, and when the night was waning toward morning, he found sufficient strength to groan and curse, as well as to make some faint inquiries in regard to their situation and prospects.

He was overjoyed to find that George and the old man were safe in their hands, and gave the most decided orders concerning their future keeping.

"Don't ye dare to let 'em git away," he said, speaking a few words at a time. "If ye blunder on keepin' 'em now, I'll shoot the man that does it with my own hand! I want the satisfaction of 'tendin' to 'em myself. Mind that now. Don't pay too much attention to me—I shall come out all

right presently ; but keep sech a watch of *them*, that there can't be any fail."

Having impressed the substance of this advice in several different forms, and with more of profane adjectives than we care to transcribe, Tom seemed to lose all interest in outside matters, and relapsed into a semi-stupid state, from which he did not awake till morning light again beamed over the earth.

With mingled sleeping, swearing, and watching their prisoners, Shay and Mifflins passed through the night, giving evidences of ferocious satisfaction when the return of day rendered their task comparatively much lighter.

An examination of the cavern showed that it was not only extensive, but complicated and peculiar in structure. Following a spiral pathway around the rock, an extensive chamber was reached directly over the entrance, having a cleft in the face of the rock, and a sort of natural balcony protruding from the front.

Back into the depths of the rocky hill there were other dark and not particularly inviting recesses, which the party did not explore. The chamber seemed to answer their purposes admirably, and thither the party at once removed. A few handfuls of boughs, scattered on one of the smoothest rocks, formed a sort of couch for Tom, on which, with many profane groans, he was laid.

The captives were assigned a place, their bonds examined anew, and while Shay remained to watch, Mifflins went out for food.

His absence was brief. When he returned, it was with the tidings that seven Indians were close at hand, following their trail up with avidity, and that Charles Marline was directing their movements.

The scene which ensued has already been presented to the reader.

During the long hours of watching which succeeded, George and the old man found opportunity, being near together, to unknot the cords which held them, and arrange some portions of a plan of escape. But the first condition necessary to a successful attempt in this direction was an opportunity, and that did not seem readily to present.

The afternoon had well advanced. Hunger and sleepiness had long been struggling for possession of the party up in midst of the rocks. Morpheus seemed at length to obtain the mastery. Nothing had been heard for some time of the Indians outside, only now and then a scalp-knot appeared for a moment, to indicate that they had not given over the siege. Tom Taylor was asleep, snoring heavily. Shay was in the same condition, though not so noisy, and Jddy Stark had been unconscious of all about him for some time. Mifflins was lazily watching the outside danger, and for a long time had not turned his eyes toward the prisoners.

Now or never, it seemed to the young man, was the time to make their escape, and a gentle touch of his foot awakened the sleeping captive. A look and a nod was all they needed for concerted action. Very carefully, slowly, they crept back toward a projecting corner of rock, and not until they were in a position to step at once behind it did either rise to his feet.

Once, while the movement was going on, Rob Mifflins looked around. But his head turned slowly, and he saw only four supposed sleeping forms. With a yawn and muttered curse, he turned again to his observation, and in a few moments more George Gregory and his aged companion were upon their feet behind the rocky spur. But they did not pause here. Stark grasped the young man's han', and led him along a rough, winding passage, which, after they had proceeded a few feet, became enveloped in a more than Egyptian darkness.

However, the old man seemed quite familiar with the place, and moved on altogether faster than Gregory could pick his way. Climbing a rock here, only to creep under one just beyond, they scrambled along until the old guide paused; and as George came up beside him, the first whisper of the journey sounded on the trembling air.

"Here's a kind of hole," he said. "'Tain't more than six foot deep. Put yer hands right on the edge of the rock, and swing off. Strike on yer toes as much as ye kin."

It seemed very much like a leap into eternity, as the young man rested his hands on the edge of the invisible abyss, and **threw himself over.**

He expected to land upon a firm, level surface, and only discovered his mistake after rolling about for some moments upon the rough rocks, and receiving numerous severe contusions.

He was not seriously injured, and very soon regained his feet, but only to meet his companion, who descended in a manner similar to his own, pitching headlong against George, and both coming to the bottom in a complicated pile.

After an assurance that neither was hurt, and indulging in a suppressed laugh at their mishap, they regained their feet, and crept away some distance, to where a projecting rock afforded a comfortable seat.

"Here we're safe for the present," the old man said.

"I should think they might hunt a while and not find us."

"Yes, and a long while. I know every part of this place. If they'd nothin' else to busy 'em, and they have, it would take hours for them to find this spot. They might come across the place whar' we got down, but that only looks like a hole; we are entirely away from that, out under the solid rock. If they held a torch down that place, they wouldn't see any signs of us. But they won't hold any lights *anywhere* till the outsiders are disposed of, you can be sure, and by that time we shall be somewhere else."

"But can't we get out some other way, and make our escape known to the men outside?"

"Not till dark. There is only one entrance, that by which we came in. There's a dozen hiding-places around here inside, but only one way to get at them all. After dark we may slip out, if nothin' turns up; but we had better commit suicide than try it now."

"Then I suppose we must wait," and with a sigh the young man leaned heavily back against the rock.

Despite all his efforts at wakefulness, Rob's eyes began to close. He winked very long and slow, then very fast, but all did not remove the gummy, heavy feeling of the lids.

Then he began to try the experiment of watching the enemy with closed eyes, but found that he forgot the Indians, and awoke with a sudden start and nod, which threatened to dislocate his neck. The momentary start seemed to awaken him, and, with eyes set resolutely to the front, he

looked out through orifices which momentarily grew narrower, until the Indians were again forgotten. Another desperate nod of the head brought him back again to consciousness; and fearful lest some one had noticed his dereliction of duty, he looked quickly around, as though to testify to his wakeful condition.

It was all right, so far as his confederates were concerned. The men were sleeping soundly. How was it with the captives? He looked for them, but only blank walls of rock met his gaze! Strangely enough, he did not rub his eyes again (as characters in fiction invariably do), but sprung to his feet, and hurried back toward the rear of the cavern.

A very brief search convinced him that they had gone beyond his reach, and another project flashed into his mind.

Hastening back to where Eben Shay was sleeping, he gave that worthy a not over-gentle kick with his foot, saying, as he bounded up:

"Come, Ebe, the reds are gettin' in shape for some kind of work, soon as it's dark. You watch 'em now, and let me rest a few minutes. You've been havin' a jolly good sleep all to yourself."

Eben made no immediate reply, but rose to his feet, and looked calmly around; a proceeding which caused his companion to feel any thing but easy.

"Where's the prisoners?" he asked, very distinctly.

"They must have slipped out while I was watching the red-skins," Mifflins replied, very frankly. "But they are somewhere inside here. They couldn't have got out without my seein' 'em, for the reds war movin' all the while, and I was so busy with them that I didn't look around for some time. But if they'd gone out I should have seen 'em."

A smile of incredulity rested upon Shay's features, but he only said:

"Then we'd best look for them, seems to me."

And he nodded toward Taylor.

"Just what you say."

"And look here!" broke from the supposed sleeping giant; "if you've let 'em off in this kind of way, both of ye know what I told ye this mornin'. Now go and bring 'em back, ef ye kin, and mind they don't slip ye for another second—not

a single second! If ye've let 'em git away for good, ye know what to expect. I always mean what I say!"

A brace of pistols, which he produced and brandished feebly, expressed the purport of his threat, even if the words had not at that moment rung with fearful distinctness in the ears of his confederates.

"Shay got asleep, and let 'em off," said Mifflins. "I was watchin' the reds all the while. First I knew, the boy and the old codger had gone."

"That's all a lie!" broke in Eben, accompanying the declaration with a string of oaths. "You agreed to watch while I rested, and plaguey poor watchin' it must be if you couldn't keep track of two men right under yer nose. That was yer own free offer!"

"No more of that!" howled the prostrate giant. "Go and look up them two prisoners, or I'll l'arn ye a lesson before ye start."

Thus invited, the two men gave a glance outside, to make sure the savages were not stealing upon them, and then hastened away to make a more thorough search for the escaped.

It was by no means a pleasant task, as they were unacquainted with the conformation of the great fissure, save as it was faintly revealed near the front by the few rays of light which entered. However, they groped their way along as best they could, until it became quite apparent that all hopes of success must be given over.

"If we had something to make a light of," remarked Shay, "we might find 'em. But we never can without."

"Light, you fool!" roared Mifflins. "Do you want to hold up a candle for some of them red-skins outside to fire at? You can have the privilege, if you do, for I am free to confess I don't want any sich honorable distinction."

The observation ended in an oath, for while moving along carelessly the speaker had stepped off the rock on which he was standing, and slid to the one below, a distance of two or three feet, sustaining some scratches and trifling bruises.

A light laugh from Shay greeted the mishap.

"Look a-here, you can laugh!" growled Rob. "I don't really relish this kind of thing, and I'm free to say I've got

enough of it. If you want to poke around here any longer you can, but blow my eyes out with a dinner-horn if I shall do it."

Thus speaking, he climbed up beside his more fortunate companion, and moved away toward the spot where the wounded giant had been left.

"But see here, Rob," pursued the other, "what'll ye do with Tom? What'll ye tell him?"

"Tell him? Why, tell him we can't find 'em, to be sure! What would you tell him?"

"You know what he said."

"Well, nonsense, what of that? If he shows any signs of wantin' to fire, we must prevail on him not to do any such rash thing."

"Prevail on him—how?"

Rob did not at once reply. His companion continued:

"I don't know how you mean, Rob, but this I can say; any little job of that kind, *you* can undertake. I don't want any hand in it. You must know Tom Taylor well enough to know that he's a mighty bad customer when he takes an affront at anybody. Don't you know that?"

"Should think I ought to. There's others know it, too. Some on the other side of the question."

"Well, no matter about them, now. But this I can tell you, I ain't goin' back to Tom till we find those men or do some good job on his side."

"Well?"

"Are you afeard to mix in with a red-skin when the marked cards are all in yer own hands?"

"Dcn't know whether I am or not, till ye tell what's in yer mind. Ye kin allus count me in if yer plan hes any sense in it. But I can't say that's often the case."

"Ye can't, eh? Well, now look a-here. If we could induce these red-skins to git out of the way, we could light a torch, and s'arch out these runaways, makin' a good smooth job all round. Don't ye see?"

"I see it, all but the 'if!'"

"Wal, now see that."

The plan he had in view was here narrated at some length, and seemed to meet the approbation of the listener from the

fact that he almost held his breath, and listened without offering a word. When the scheme had been fully expounded, he drew a long breath, and, after a moment of reflection, remarked :

" You're a regular brick, Eben. This time your plan is pretty fairly sensible. Only you'll stand a right good chance of gittin' a hole through the linin' of your coat. But, then, that's nothin'. Yes, you can count me in on that."

There was a brief survey of weapons, and then the twain moved down to the entrance.

CHAPTER XII.

THE WHITE FLAG.

THE day had passed on leaden wings to Charles Marline. Dangerous as the undertaking would have been, he would gladly have attempted to storm the rocky recess, and bring forth the prisoners, but that was not an Indian method of warfare, and he could not induce the red-men to accompany him. They preferred to lie in wait for darkness, and then use all the ingenuity of their minds to devise some trap for the white men.

Charles was lying upon the ground, his mind wandering uneasily from the scene before him to the robbed *cache*, and then to Lena Corrol, in her unenviable home, when Blue Belt came up, and touched his arm.

" Something come," he said.

The young man sprung up and glanced toward the opening of the cavern.

Sure enough, something was coming, and that something was no more or less than Eben Shay and Rob Mifflins, who had emerged to the open air, floating a very dirty piece of white rag before them.

A word to the Indians sufficed to put every one upon the alert, and then Charles, who had taken the fallen red man's gun, stepped forward with the stern order :

" Halt!"

The request was obeyed, and then the young man continued :

"What is the meaning of that rag, and what do you want?"

"We've had an outbreak in here," pursued Shay. "Tom is dead, and the boy is dyin'. We want you to come in and look arter 'em. As for us, we've had enough of it, and want to g' home."

"If you want to talk with us, lay down your guns, and all your weapons," said Charles, seeing that both held their rifles in readiness for immediate use.

"We don't care any thing about talking," pursued Shay. "All we want is to have you bury Tom in decent shape, and the young man, too. If you'll do that, and see him, quick, for he's got somethin' he wants to tell ye mortally, we'll go home, and see that the square thing's done you there."

"No ye won't, ye cowardly sneaks; I ain't dead yet!" roared a voice from the cleft rocks above and behind them. "Come back here, you miserable runygades, and stand to yer bizness, or I'll be the death of ye now!"

Of course such a speech, and the appearance of Tom's bandaged head at the aperture, diverted attention for a moment from the truce-bearers. That moment they improved. Dropping the emblem of peace, and taking a hasty aim, both fired their guns, and then, with weapons clubbed rushed upon the Indians.

So short was the distance between the two parties that the smoke from both guns floated directly over upon Charles, not only obscuring him from the view of the excited villain who sought his life, but preventing him from obtaining view of them until they had passed him, and were engaged in a hand-to-hand struggle with the Indians.

Then he could not fire upon them through danger of injur to his own friends, and for some moments he debated with himself whether to follow and assist the red-men, or try to enter and solve the mysteries of the cavern.

But a glance at the conflict shewed him that the impetuosity of the two white men made them fearful enemies for even the five unharmed savages who opposed them, two of whom had fallen in the first onset. As it would not be good policy to invite the defeat of his own allies, and then find

himself cooped up in an unfamiliar cavern at the mercy of a treacherous gang of cut-throats, Charles sprung to the scene of conflict, just in time to join in the final discomfiture of the traitors.

A brawny Indian sprung upon Shay, wrenched away the clubbed gun with which he was striking right and left, and ended that individual's career by plunging his broad hunting-knife through and through his breast.

Marline had drawn a pistol, but finding he could not safely use it in the melee, thrust it again into his belt, and had recourse to his clubbed gun. He aimed a furious blow at Rob, but even as he did so, the desperado sunk to the ground.

A whoop of delight burst from the red-men, and a rush was made for the prostrate form. Glancing at the spot where Shay had fallen, Charles saw that the horrible process of scalping had already taken place, and that the bloody, ghastly trophy was dangling from the belt of the victor, who was dancing and howling in mad delight at the distinction which had fallen to him.

Comprehending the purpose to perform a similar act on the body of Miffins, Charles at once interposed. The rite was, in his estimation, the most brutal and uncalled for, and his whole soul revolted from such an indignity to the dead.

"No, no; back, back!" he exclaimed, standing over the fallen man and conveying his meaning as much by gestures as by words. "You must not mutilate the dead body even of your enemy. I shall not allow it—it is brutal and unworthy of brave men, as you have shown yourselves."

The Indians paused, and while they did not express their feelings in words, it was plain to be seen that they were far from pleased at the position taken by the young man. A length one of the savages pointed to their own fallen, and in very broken English remarked:

"Squaws feel very bad—cry—no take comfort. See scalp, then no more feel cry—feel very glad!"

"But the scalps can not bring back your warriors," the young man returned. "They can not bring other red-men to fill their places. But when the good white man knows that you hang them in your cabins, he will think you bad Indians, and no longer give you guns, or powder, or clothing."

BLUE BELT, THE GUIDE; OR,

The Indians drew off somewhat, and seemed consulting together in regard to his words. Thinking it a good time to make a counter-interest, he exclaimed:

"Come, now to the rocks!"

With a whoop and a dash, for the Indian blood was up now, and no longer capable of control, the party sped across the narrow space which separated them from the entrance.

A single shot was fired from the upper opening as they went forward, but none of the party of five were wounded. Blue Belt, notwithstanding his wounded arm, found his fighting blood up once more, and had joined the party, knife in hand.

Charles was in advance, and just as he reached the entrance, chancing to glance over his shoulder, he saw Rob Mifflins the man whom he had supposed dead, rise to his feet, look about for a single instant, and then dart away at the top of his speed!

But there was no time to give that movement further attention. The mysteries of the cavern, which he had all day been so anxious to penetrate, lay before the young man, and not to solve them now would be a cruel disappointment indeed.

The way was somewhat dark, but he saw readily in what manner the upper ledge had been reached, and with the Indians following gingerly in his footsteps, the young man pressed on.

All around lay bowlders and projected spurs from which an enemy might fire; but Charles had no longer any thought of danger—he only looked for discoveries.

But just as he reached the last steep ascent, a sharp flash and loud report startled the party. The young man's cap flew from his head, and with a hollow groan he fell back upon his followers, and down the rocky ascent.

In a moment all courage on the part of the Indians seemed to fade away. They mustered barely enough to drag the young man down to the entrance, and having glanced at the horrible wound in his head, just above the temple, disposed the inanimate body, as carefully as Indians could be expected to do under such circumstances, and then hastened outside to find places of greater safety.

Only Blue Belt remained for a moment to note more carefully the nature of the wound, and satisfy himself whether the young man was really dead, and then he followed his people.

Tom Taylor had won a victory. Deserted by his colleagues in sin, he had still, while unable to move without the most intense pain in his injured head, used his pistols with such effect as to drive back the victorious Indians, and secured him another period of immunity from attack; though how soon the attempt upon his stronghold might be renewed he had no means of knowing.

To guard against it, he set to work reloading his weapons.

But what of our escaped captives, all this time?

One of them, at least, was not idle.

When Rob Mifflins slipped from the rock, and thereby strengthened his determination not to continue the hopeless search longer, he was so near the hiding-place of the men he sought that they not only heard the movement, but a portion of the conversation which ensued.

In a moment the old man seemed to regain all the energy of former years. He clambered up the sides of his hiding-place, listened to the scrambling footsteps till they had passed down to the entrance, and then he returned to Gregory.

"I'm goin' up a minute," he said, in eager tones. "Do you wait here for me. I don't think I shall be gone long, but if I do, ye needn't be afraid. I've got suthin' in my mind, but it ain't any thing you can help me about. Oh, no! You wait here. I understand the lay of these rocks, and you don't. If I ain't back within an hour at the very most, you'll find me somewhere outside. I can't tell ye jest whar, but maybe somewhere near Tom Taylor."

"It seems you are going upon some kind of a desperate mission," replied the young man. "Let me at least go along with you. I can hardly be an impediment, and it does seem as though I might be of service to you."

"Yer a good boy, George," was the earnest response, "and generally ye understand things well for one of yer years; but in this yer altogether mistaken. Ye couldn't render me any possible service, and ye might spile my plan in goin' out. Jest wait for me—I'll be back in a very few moments—I mean I shall be back purty soon, if I come at all."

George tried to urge the case further, but Jeddy would not listen, and at his request the young man assisted him up from the cavity.

The old man crept down near to the entrance, and was just in time to hear the conversation between the bearers of the flag and Charles Marline, in which Tom Taylor had also a voice. The fight which ensued was quite unexpected to Stark, but he watched it with the utmost interest, retreating back among the rocks at its conclusion, and waiting with the greatest anxiety for the events which were to follow. He could almost have touched the file of Indians which passed him ascending toward the spot where Taylor lay, like a wounded lion at bay. He did utter a low exclamation of horror when Marline fell back down the acclivity, but in the general confusion it was not observed.

Remaining very quiet until the last Indian had left the place, the old man hastened down and bent over the lifeless form.

"Poor fellow," he said, while a tear bedewed his aged eye "it's too bad that such as him gets killed in this outlandish kind of way. I can't think he's dead now. Maybe if I only had a good airb poultice, such as I put on chief Big Beads, I could bring him out all right. But my airbs are all gone, and maybe I am gone myself. The next few minutes will show."

He carefully drew a revolver from Marline's belt.

"This is what I want," he said, after examining it. "I don't like to take it without leave; but I don't think the young man'll need it any more, and I must have something of this kind to do *my* work. It is high time it was done."

Having satisfied himself that the weapon was properly loaded, and ready for immediate use, he crept up toward the chamber of rocks where Tom Taylor was holding solitary watch.

That individual, having seen his Indian foes depart from the rock, was watching in the direction they had taken, so that he was wholly unaware of the approach of Jeddy Stark, till that individual stood almost over him, and in a voice quite unsteady from emotion, remarked:

"Well, Tom Taylor, we meet once more!"

The person addressed moved his head quickly, but caught the muzzle of a pistol looking coldly down upon him, and cowered at the moment. He would have brought one of his own weapons to bear, but before he could do so the movement was detected, and Stark exclaimed :

"Don't try to use your pistols unless you are ready to take the contents of this. I want to talk with you a few minutes."

"Talk, then," growled Tom, "but turn aside that old pepper-box—it makes me nervous!"

"No wonder, Tom Taylor, no wonder. But if I turn it aside now, it will not be for a long time. *I have come here to use it!* Now, if you've any preparation to make, be prompt in making it; for your time has come!"

"Not as ye knows of!" the prostrate man hissed forth.

He had manipulated a pistol beneath his body, and now, throwing his arm quickly upward, he fired it full at the breast of Jddy Stark. The old man saw but could not avert the movement. He, too, fired, and the two reports, with their fierce echoes and sulphurous smoke, were almost mingled into one.

When the vapor lifted somewhat, it discovered two men lying upon the rocky floor, gasping, dying. The old man spoke first, and his voice was very faint.

"Tom, are you hurt much?" he asked.

"Hurt! You know I am killed," was the almost savage reply.

"So am I," the old man rejoined, in a strange tone. "We are both dying. Both going up to the great Judge of all together—how do you like that, Tom Taylor?"

A groan, but no reply.

"You have made the world believe me a murderer and a villain these many years, when the crimes were your own. But now we shall answer, each for his own deeds. You drove me away from all my friends, home—away from the world. Even then, when my feeble old hands had built a shelter from the storms, you came and burned it—"

"I know I've been a great sinner," said Tom, feebly; "but I can't ondo any of it now; I only ask to be forgiven. Will you do it?"

"Yes, Tom, I'll forgive ye, for I hain't been blameless myself ; but there's another One!"

"Who?"

"God!"

"Jeddy, will He be less merciful than you?"

There was a fearful eagerness in the tones, while the panting, shortened breath showed how soon the sin-laden soul must go forth to that unseen Judge.

"I don't know, Tom ; I hope not."

Again Tom tried to speak, but there was only a great gasp, one mighty convulsion of the frame, and then all was over.

The old man turned his eyes, but they rested only upon the form of death. Was that a footstep he heard? It sounded like one.

"George!" he tried to gasp, and a strange whisper ran along the rocky galleries.

"Here I am," answered the youth, who, alarmed at the pistol-shots, had hastened out from his hiding-place.

He moved up to the spot, but the breath which had whispered his name was the last the old man ever drew. Side by side those two lifeless forms were lying, each grasping in his right hand the weapon which had slain the other.

A moment the youth gazed upon the spectacle ; then, with a shudder and a tear, he turned away.

At the foot of the rocky ascent he saw the body of Charles Marline.

For a moment he leaned against the rock, pale and almost faint, but presently recovered his composure, and moved forward.

"He is not dead!" the youth exclaimed, as he parted the matted hair away from the bloody wound. "The bullet did not penetrate the skull. He *will* live—he *must* not, on, my NOT die!"

CHAPTER XIII

MEONA.

CHARLES MARLINE did not die.

His wound had the appearance of being dangerous, but Blue Belt felt bound to care for his "white brother," and after disposing of the other matters, it was decided by the Indians to take him, along with their own braves, one of whom was severely wounded, back to their camping-ground.

Two Indians had been killed, and this fact was sufficient to engender a deal of bitter feeling toward the race in which their murderers claimed nationality; but, at the urgent request of Blue Belt, it was considerably smothered, and the departed braves quietly buried.

The three dead whites were left in a pile inside the cavern, Tom Taylor being scalped by one of the ambitious savages, though the silver locks of Jddy Stark were not disturbed.

George Gregory accompanied and assisted the three braves in bearing their wounded charges to their encampment, and then he disappeared.

When Charles Marline came to realize his condition, he found that he was inside a neat lodge made of fresh boughs, very tastefully woven, and with a couch of the same, which was quite agreeable, even though he had lain upon it for long and weary days. His head was very sore and painful still, but he could lie and take in the scenes which were passing before him without any particular exertion, and this was very agreeable to him under the circumstances.

Blue Belt came into the lodge at times, and an old medicine-woman visited the patient occasionally, but there was one who came much oftener, and in whom Charles was much more interested. This was an Indian girl, with plain costume, and very regular, almost handsome, features.

There seemed to Charles something strangely familiar in those features. It seemed he must have known them for years. But then he reasoned that in all probability he had

seen them before he became fully conscious, and that thus they had become fastened and imprinted upon his brain.

This girl seemed to be his nurse, his companion, his guardian. At times, when she supposed him to be sleeping, the young man saw her watching his features most intently, with an interest in his welfare so deeply apparent that he felt strangely drawn toward her.

Once or twice he ventured to address her, but she pointed to the wound upon his head, and shook her own so emphatically, that he soon gave up the attempt to draw her into conversation, the more especially as, after each such attempt, she retired from the lodge, and was absent a longer time than usual.

What did it mean? Could it be that this maiden of the forest had fallen in love with him, and that the tender care she so kindly bestowed upon him was the prompting of a pure affection? That was the most natural deduction—more than that, it was about the only one he could bring to mind.

In that case, he could readily see difficulty standing before him. If the tawny maiden should persist in her display of affection, and claim a return for the undeniable services she had rendered, how could he in honor avoid some decided act of justice? But then, if he should attempt her satisfaction, might he not find it quite beyond his ability, without too seriously compromising himself?

He resolved to know the whole truth at the earliest possible moment, and as he could obtain this only from Blue Belt, he waited with impatience for the appearance of that individual.

It was just after dinner. From the hands of his unknown nurse he had been enjoying some most delicious morsels of food, which seemed to fill his frame with new vigor, looking up once in a while into those large, earnest eyes, which were always gazing down upon him with such fervent, soulful expression.

But, just then, Blue Belt came in, and as soon as possible thereafter, the Indian maiden withdrew.

The young man was fast gaining strength now, and, turning toward the new-comer, he said, almost abruptly :

"Blue Belt, who is that girl?"

"Meona."

"Meona! Who is she?"

"Indian girl—Dacotah."

"Dacotah! What is she doing with your people?"

"Only stay here."

And he indicated the confines of the lodge within which he was standing.

"How long since she came here?"

"Three or four days."

"How long have I been here?"

The Indian counted out the five digits of one hand.

"Why does she stay here, and take care of me in this way?"

"Don't know. Maybe want to be a pale-face-squaw—eh?"

Charles did not reply. But he did indicate his impatience by a motion, and Blue Belt, not anxious, evidently, to be further catechised, soon left the lodge. During the remainder of the day he only saw the old medicine-woman, who was about as repulsive in appearance as could easily be imagined.

Charles was weak. What he had learned from Blue Belt was too much for him. He tried to ponder it over, and the very attempt made his head swim and grow confused, till finally he forgot all in sleep.

When he awoke it was nearly dark, and the old medicine woman was standing beside him with a gourd of villainous-tasting gruel—at least it tasted villainous from her hands. But really he was more engaged in wondering why Meona did not come with it. Had she left the spot, so that he could see her no more?

He could gain no information of the present attendant, for she knew no English, and he did not understand a guttural of the torrents she sometimes poured out. His only alternative was to sleep through the long night, and see what another day would bring forth—which he did.

Next morning he awoke stronger in body, and with a decidedly clearer head. It was very early, as he could see by glancing forth, so he tried to sleep longer, but the attempt was quite vain. His mind was full of his strange Indian attendant. Should he see her when his morning meal was

brought? Or would the old hag, whose whole appearance was very like that of a bundle of dried herbs, supply him?

Blue Belt came first, but the young man repressed the query he longed to utter, and waited until he should have ocular answer.

He did not have long to wait.

Presently a hand was fumbling at the opening, the curtain of skins was drawn aside, and Charles looked up, hoping, yet trembling.

But this time his hopes were realized. It was Meona who entered.

A glad smile ran over her features as she noticed the improved condition of her patient, and then her eyes were quickly cast down.

With an air such as she had never assumed before, she stood near the couch, and then very quietly and quickly withdrew.

Charles raised his head, purposing to call after her, but, upon second thought, refrained. What should he say to her, in case he opened conversation? If she really loved him—and of this fact he could scarcely any longer doubt—would it be gentlemanly or gallant to force her to a confession of the tender passion, or even to propound any questions touching upon the delicate topic?

"If Lena Corrol was not in the case; and if SHE were not an Indian—but what a fool!" he broke in, abruptly. "There are two *ifs* in the case, neither one of which can be disposed of now, if I wanted them set aside ever so badly. Just as well to take life as it comes. I'm not to blame if this Dacotah girl has fallen in love with me!"

All this while he had not the most remote assurance, save his own fancy and the careless words of Blue Belt, that any such condition of mind had fallen upon the dark-faced maiden.

During the day Charles improved very rapidly, sitting up without any decided effort, and even walking into the open air without any bad effects, so that his movements were very steady.

Day by day he continued to get better, growing stronger while the wound upon his head healed as rapidly as could

have been asked for. But just in proportion as he regained the exercise of his natural powers did he lose sight of Meona. They no longer met save at rare intervals, and still more rarely did he catch her eye.

That Indian girl was a mystery, a perpetual source of wonder. And not the most pleasant feature of her mystery was the fact that he knew not how to make it less so. He began to think now of making an effort to return home, since he could hope for no good results from a longer stay. But it would be very unkind to go without speaking any word of thankfulness to her, after all the tender care received at her hands. He would not do so ungrateful an act. But how should he make proper acknowledgments to the timid Indian beauty? Had the debt been due to one of his own race he would not long have hesitated. But to this wild, untamed Dacotah, the case was very different.

Day by day he thought over the subject as he wandered about the encampment and in the forest adjoining, but came no nearer to a solution of the enigma.

One day he had wandered further even than his increasing strength allowed. He became very tired, and sharp pains darted through his head. Finding a convenient mossy bank, beneath some spreading evergreens, he threw himself upon it for a rest, and perhaps a snatch of sleep, before starting upon his return.

Whether he purposed to sleep or not, he was soon in the land of dreams, and his sleeping visions were of Meona. It seemed she was beside him, a mere child, but very beautiful, in all save complexion. He prayed earnestly that she might become white, and at once his petition was granted. She grew to womanhood while he gazed, and as he was about to clasp her in his arms, a monstrous serpent arose from the earth, and threw its folds about her. Her shriek awoke him.

But the cry did not cease with the awakening. A voice of expostulation and entreaty—a woman's voice, came to his ears still, and he hurriedly pulled apart the evergreens to gaze through.

What a thrill of horror went over him at the sight!

Scarcely more than two rods away was Meona, the very

subject of his dreams, struggling in the grasp of a monstrous Indian. He had secured both her hands in one of his, and clutching her throat with the other was in the act of throwing her to the earth at the moment Charles caught sight of the scene. He did not hesitate a second, but springing to his feet, and grasping the stout stick he used in walking, rushed forth, and succeeded in showering a half-dozen crushing blows upon the back and shoulders of the unguarded savage before he could recover an upright position, and produce a hatchet.

But Charles was prepared for even such a demonstration. One hand traveled quickly to his belt, and when it was withdrawn presented a pistol full at the abashed aborigine. As the latter drew back a pace the white man advanced correspondingly.

"Go home with you," he exclaimed, "for if you make another motion toward me or this poor girl, I'll blow your brains out on the spot! Go!"

Whether or not the Indian understood the rapidly-uttered words of English, may be questioned. But beyond a doubt he understood the meaning of that frowning pistol, and the stern features of the man who held it.

At any rate he slunk away until the forest trees hid him, and then continued his way toward the encampment of his people.

The look of gratitude and thankfulness which beamed from the Indian girl's eyes, as she regained her feet and stood before her deliverer, went directly to the young man's heart.

"You are not hurt?" he asked, placing one hand tenderly upon her shoulder.

"Oh, no, no," she replied, very quickly and earnestly, looking up with an expression which thrilled the young man.

Then, as though frightened at her own boldness, she dropped her eyes, stepped back a pace, and giving one hurried glance at Charles and around, fled from the spot.

Marline stood astounded. He was now more than ever mystified. Why should she fly from him at such a moment, when, beyond all question, her heart was overflowing with gratitude for the signal favor he had just rendered her?

His first impulse was to call upon her, and this was acted upon.

"Meona!" he shouted.

She stopped at the call, and remained facing him.

"Meona, come back here," he said, seeing that she did not intend to do so.

"Why come back?" she asked, taking a step or two toward him.

"Because I want to talk with you—want to know who and what you are!" he replied, impulsively.

She hesitated a moment, and then shook her head slowly.

"No, not now," she said, and continued her retreat.

Charles might have followed, and attempted to urge the explanation he desired, but a moment's reflection showed him how impossible any attempt of the kind would be, and very reluctantly he turned his steps back toward the camp of his Indian friends.

CHAPTER XIV

A NEW DANGER.

WHEN Charles reached the Indian village he saw at once that some matter had considerably excited the savages there, and, from the manner in which he was regarded, had no difficulty in locating the cause.

But no open manifestation was made, and being very much wearied by his walk, he passed directly through to his own little lodge, and laid himself down for rest.

In a short time Blue Belt came in, and his face was very much troubled. The young man began to fear that matter might be more serious than he had suspected.

"What you do?" the Indian asked, taking a seat beside the young man's couch.

"What did I do?" returned Charles, firing up with thought of the indignity he had been fortunately abled to prevent; "I found one of the Indians abusing that girl Meona, that has taken care of me like a saint, and I gave him a caning! That was all."

"So bad," repeated Blue Belt, slowly. "That was very bad!"

"Bad!" repeated Charles. "I ought to have shot him. What would you have had me do?"

"Not strike, but tell the chief."

"The chief be blowed! Blue Belt, I wouldn't have seen that thing done by a white man without shooting him. But there ain't any too good feeling now between the whites and your people, and I don't want to make matters any worse. But I don't forget what this poor girl had done for me, and I'd be worse than a brute if I didn't wullup any man that insulted her. But what do your people say?"

It was difficult to tell. Stormgoer, the brave who had been chastised, came back to camp very indignant, and displayed the sorry ridges across his back, with many vows of vengeance. Being one of the most popular warriors of the gang, very skillful as a hunter, and very dangerous when he had any of the pale-face's fire-water aboard, many of the people joined with him in expressions of indignation, only restraining him when he declared a purpose of rushing upon Charles, and obtaining satisfaction, in the form of the young man's scalp.

Marline knew enough of the Indian character to know that it was any thing but safe for him there. Any sudden out-break would endanger him to such an extent that even his brotherhood with Blue Belt would be of no account. It was now late in the afternoon. He therefore resolved to sleep and rest within his own lodge until the dawn of next day, and then set forth for home. He should leave behind Stormgoer, Meona, the *cache*, and all his other sources of annoyance. And in this plan Blue Belt concurred, offering to accompany him as far as it would be possible to apprehend any danger from the Indians.

But how much may occur between two days to change human purposes and destinies.

The medicine-woman brought his supper, of which the young man partook very sparingly. Once he had been drugged, and it was not impossible that these Indians, who were plainly displeased with him, might attempt something of a similar nature. But feeling no evil effects after a considerable time, he finally ate quite heartily, and then gave himself up to sleep.

He was awakened by a strange noise. Sleeping or waking, he knew not which, it came to him, undefinable and startling.

Springing up in his berth, he saw, or fancied he saw, a form moving through the opening of his lodge.

"Who's there?" he demanded, in loud tones.

There was no answer, and after waiting a moment, he sprung from the couch, with a pistol in hand.

Great heavens! what was this?

A great Indian form was lying beside the frame-work which supported his humble resting-place, and a quick examination showed it to be none other than Stormgoer, stabbed through the heart, and covered with blood!

The savage's right hand still held a hatchet, and a knife had evidently fallen from the left.

It was easy to see that he had come to the spot intending to murder the young man while he slept; but had met a deserved fate instead. It was not as easy to see how the opportune deliverer had done the work so promptly, so silently and so well.

He bent lower. The Indian was yet breathing, very slowly and heavily—evidently fast dying.

A thought flashed across the young man's mind. He would call up all the Indians, and bring them to witness what had taken place.

He turned toward the lodge entrance with that purpose, only to find himself confronted by some of the very persons he was going in search of.

Naturally surprised, he stammered forth something, and moved aside that they might view the bloody work. He was still further surprised when some of those present grasped him, secured his hands, took away his weapons, and placed him outside under guard.

The Indians were rapidly aroused by the tumult—men, women, and children hastening to the spot. A general wailing was set up over the fate of Stormgoer, and loud were the threats of vengeance on his murderer, as they supposed, Charles Marline.

Suddenly there was a general rush. The guard, who made but a trifling resistance, was hurried away, and then a mad

crowd seized the unfortunate young man, and dragged him into the forest.

Beyond all doubt, they intended to make a speedy sacrifice of him, but the mode did not seem so well agreed upon. No sooner were they well out of the encampment limits than some of the younger males began to brandish weapons, and the squaws to flourish clubs, struggling to get at him and effectually blocking up the way against further progress.

At once a deadly quarrel became imminent. But, fortunately, one of the gang, more respected than the others, called out, and finally induced the wild rabble to listen to his words.

By his direction, a circle was formed, the prisoner and a guard inside, and then he stepped forward and spoke earnestly for a few moments. The substance of his remarks may be translated into English.

"The prisoner is a white dog. He has killed our brave Stormgoer, and our hearts are sad. We will punish him, but we will not give him the death of a dog, as he deserves. The white people call us cruel, because we do not kill as they kill. We *will* kill in their way. We will hang this man. Then our white brothers may be satisfied, and our dead brave shall be avenged."

A general assent was given to this proposition, and the rope, or cord of raw-hide, which answered instead of the hempen standard, was thrown over the limb of a tree near at hand.

It certainly began to look bad for Charles Marline.

A shout was given—a savage, Indian shout—and the young man was led toward the pendant noose. But, ere they quite reached the spot, another shout was heard, which caused them to pause very quickly on hearing it, and turn back.

It was a single voice which shouted, but it belonged to one whom they feared and obeyed, their chief. He was hastening toward the spot, accompanied by Blue Belt.

The latter, seeing the condition of affairs, as the party dragged Charles from the camp, knew the fate he would be sure to meet without prompt interference. He at once hastened to the chief, who was very jealous of his authority, and

assured him that a movement was on foot to rob him of his supremacy over the people.

By direction of the chief, Charles was again conducted to the scene of the murder, where the body of Stormgoer was laid in state, and a council was ordered to sit early in the morning for a legal trial of the accused.

Three guards were then placed over the prisoner, with most decided orders touching his safety, and the other Indians retired to their lodges, to wish away the time between that and morning.

Charles slept no more that night. To be sure, he had obtained a few hours' respite of life, but of promise for the future—none.

Evidently, the Indians did not seem to question the matter of his guilt or innocence. He had been seen alone with the dying red-skin, and that seemed to them proof enough.

But what would his friends ever know of his fate? His infirm father, in whose behalf, principally, the journey had been undertaken—how would he wait, and hope, and grow weary for the boy that never came back to him?

If he could write a few lines, just to inform his father, no doubt Blue Belt would forward it in some manner so that it would reach its destination. But, then, he had no materials for writing, and, of course, none could be obtained among the savages; so that thought was reluctantly given up.

Then, too, Lena would be looking for him, and think him faithless and untrue, as years rolled by and he did not come.

Then he wondered still more in regard to Meona, the great enigma of his life. What would her sensations be when she learned that, after all her efforts in his behalf, he had finally died at the hands of the red-men, and as an indirect consequence of his interference in her behalf?

The night wore away at length, and the day began to dawn—the day of his destiny! From the number of Indians astir early as the first rays of light, it was evident that their watch had been as sleepless as his.

The sun was not very high when the council was called. This time it was only braves who had a seat or voice, and their session was quite short. In fact, there seemed to be scarcely a difference of opinion.

The chief quite agreed with his men that the murderer deserved death ; and now, that his authority was properly regarded, he cared not how speedily it was inflicted.

The same method and the same place were decided upon, and then a-rush of the squaws and children to the spot communicated the news to Charles.

A signal was given to his guards, and the young man was led off toward the place of execution.

The result was no more than he had been led to expect, but the haste attending it was somewhat extra. Even Blue Belt seemed to have deserted him now.

Reaching the expectant, hissing, and howling crowd about the place of execution, he managed to attract the attention of the chief and demanded :

" How is this, chief of the red-men ? Do you condemn a man without a word from him ? We do not so treat a dog."

" You can talk something," he said, " but good many Injun no understand' much."

Having even this ungracious consent, the young man tried to address the disgusting audience about him. But they had come to witness his death-struggles, and nothing short of that would claim much attention from them. It was in vain he assured them that he was innocent ; that Stormgoer came to his lodge in the darkness of night, like a coward as he was, to murder a white man who had whipped him for committing a great wrong. Equally in vain that he warned them of the vengeance which the white man's Government would mete out to them. Belabored with sticks and clubs in the hands of the squaws, he finally ceased, and the few remaining preparations were rapidly made.

The noose was placed over his neck and drawn taut, the other end of the cord placed in the hands of as many savages as could grasp it, and all was ready for the closing scene.

A hand-wave from the plume-decked chief, and the victim was drawn from the earth, and suspended in mid-air !

CHAPTER XV

THE MYSTERY.

AT the very moment when Rolling Wind, the chief, gave his signal for the strangulation of Charles Marline, there was a quiet commotion in the outer ranks of the circle, and George Gregory calmly but firmly pushed his way through the crowding natives.

One after another gave way to his advances, scarcely conscious whom they were admitting to the scene. In fact, all eyes were so intently fixed upon the form from which they purposed to choke the life, that none seemed really aware of the presence of another white man until George bounded into the little open space beneath the victim.

Then, indeed, a murmur of surprise ran along the dusky line.

“ You do wrong !” he shouted. “ Let him down ! Let him down !”

But the savages did not obey.

George had a power of his own.

Whipping an unseen knife from its sheath, he quickly severed the thong, and Charles fell to the ground. A murmur of rage ran along the witnesses of the bold act, and a few weapons were brandished ; but the youth—a mere boy he seemed as he stood there in the midst of the scowling red-skins—dropped his knife to the earth, and put up his hand in a manner to arrest the attention of even the bloodthirsty men who surrounded him.

“ You must not harm that man,” George said ; “ he is not guilty. I am the one who killed Stormgoer !”

There was another display of weapons, this time more extensive, but the fearless youth continued :

“ Stay, you must hear me ! See—here is my rifle and pistol, there is my knife ; every thing laid aside. I am your prisoner, but hear me.

“ I saw this brave whom I killed steal in upon the white

man that I loved as a brother. He had a knife and hatchet in his hand, and went to kill the white man. What could I do? I did what every brave here would have done—I killed him to save my friend. Will you slay me for that?"

There was a silence that boded well for the daring youth; but at the same time dark glances were thrust from beneath many a compressed brow, showing plainly that all present were not friends of the man who had slain one of their best braves and hunters.

But no hands were placed upon him, and taking the opportunity, he slipped over and whispered a few words in the ears of Rolling Wind and Blue Belt.

What those words might have been no other persons knew, but they seemed to produce a powerful effect. Blue Belt, with two other warriors, at once took George away from the spot, and conducted him to a lodge which chanced to be unoccupied. Rolling Wind, with other assistance, took Charles Marline, who had been rendered insensible, to the lodge he before occupied, where he soon regained consciousness, and was made as comfortable as possible under the circumstances.

Naturally he was surprised to find himself alive still, and made frequent inquiries; but the Indians who attended him were quite disappointed at his condition, and seemed unusually taciturn, so that he really learned nothing save what his senses taught him. Still, that fact was in itself quite pleasing, and he was not disposed to be captious.

"It really seems I'm not born to be drugged, shot, assassinated or hung!" he mused. "Wonder what in the way of adventure will come next?"

Even while the thought took form, Blue Belt entered, and advancing to his side, asked:

"You walk little ways now?"

"Yes, I think so, Blue Belt; that is, if you do not intend to try hanging me again. In that case, I must decline."

"Oh, no—young man here killed Stormgoer. He want to see you."

"Young man killed Stormgoer!" mused Charles. "That upsets all my calculations. Young Indian, no doubt, though I don't suppose— Well, I'll go and see."

He followed the silent lead of Blue Belt, and when they

reached the outer air, found that his step was almost as firm as before his ordeal of hanging.

Entering the little lodge, which was very jealously guarded by Indian braves, and surrounded by all the idle of the camp—which, in an Indian town, means the whole population—he saw inside two red-skinned guards, and George Gregory.

Very pale and anxious the latter looked now, and his nerves did not seem entirely calm as he rose to meet the newcomers. But his were vastly calmer than those of Charles Marline. As George came toward him he stopped, and as he peered closely into the pallid features, demanded :

“Who are you, in Heaven’s name?”

“Don’t you know me?”

“I do, or I do not. I can not tell. It must be I am delirious. *You are not Meona?*”

“All we say”—and George glanced around—“must be said before these Indians. I am sorry. *I am Meona!*”

“Yes, I see it now. But that is not all. I want to know more. That does not explain all. You are more than Meona and yourself—who else are you?”

“How do you know that I am more? No one can have told you my secret, for no one knows it.”

“No one *has* told me. But there is a secret, as I know, and I can almost solve it. But I am wild; I must be going crazy. Come, tell me who you are, and then tell me all.”

“Then you do not remember me—do not know that you have seen me before?”

How familiar that voice sounded, and yet how vain his attempt to locate it! He turned away, and tried to grasp the clue, but in vain.

“I ought to know,” he said, “but I am obliged to confess it—I do not.”

A look of deep sadness stole over the face of Gregory. He turned away for a moment, and it might be he brushed a tear.

“Let it be enough,” he said, “that I am Meona and myself. You will be as well satisfied not to know the other. I had hoped that *your* eyes would penetrate the disguise, when the proper time came. But it may be I was wrong in my conclusions.”

Charles grasped the arm next to him, and a great light

seemed to dawn upon him. Bending close to the other, in a voice which trembled from the intensity of his feelings, he asked :

“ Are you—it can not be that you are—*Lena Corrol?* ”

“ What if I am, and what if I am not? ”

“ If you are, and I think I am right, when I say you are, then I tell you, and I will yet tell everybody, that you are the bravest and truest girl in the world! Tell me—tell me quick, for I can not stand this suspense, are you or are you not, Lena? ”

“ Mr. Marline, if I have done wrong it is my own fault. I am *Lena!* ”

“ Great Heaven! Shut up and guarded in this manner by these Indians! It must not be. They must release you, instantly! ”

“ Stay, Mr. Marline; you forget that I am a prisoner by my own free will—”

“ Put your own neck in the noose to save mine! ” broke in Charles.

“ And you are very little better. We must work very cautiously, or we never shall leave here. Blue Belt, here, is a friend of mine, and the chief knows my father. Besides,” and she bent her lips close to his ear, “ I have a revolver which they have not yet discovered, and which may serve in a desperate chance! ”

“ Lena, what a girl you are! ”

“ I think so myself, sometimes. But I am ready now, if you want to hear my story, and how I came to bear so many different characters. ”

“ By all means, if it will be safe to take the time now. ”

“ As well now as ever. Our friend Blue Belt is going now to have a talk with the chief, Rolling Wind, and while he is away, perhaps we can talk of nothing better than of what has passed since we parted so abruptly that night at Bawny Corrol’s. ”

Seeing that his presence would be no longer required there, Blue Belt departed upon a mission which seemed to have been arranged before hand between himself and Lena—for by this name will we now call her.

When he had gone, the maiden related what had occurred

from the time of Charles' sudden departure up to the hour when she resolved to leave the place which she had called home so long.

"My first thought," she continued, "was for my own safety, and I purposed going toward some of the nearest settlements; then, even that seemed a very severe task. But I remembered that Tom Taylor had followed you, and I knew how great your danger would be, when he had the double incentive of money and passion to urge him on. If I could only warn you of your peril! But I thought for a long time, and could reach no conclusions how this could be done. I did not know where you were, or whether I could find you if I made the attempt. But at last a thought came to my aid. A young man who claimed to be a very strong friend of mine, and was about my own age and size, had often expressed himself ready to do me any favor in the world, as a proof of his friendship. I went to his house, found him, and told him my needs. He was very glad to help me, even to furnish me with a complete suit of his own clothing, which I knew must be no small sacrifice on his part, and trimming up my hair until I passed for quite a boy! Finally he gave me a knife which had long done duty in his own pocket, and procured a rifle and revolver for my use. My own clothing I put upon the river-bank, and left the place to find and warn you, or incur every danger in the attempt."

Was it a discredit to the listener's manhood that a tear came to his eye as he thought upon the devotion and sacrifices of the intrepid girl in his behalf? If so, his manhood must bear that stain, for such was the fact. It was more touching still to see how poorly she regarded her own trials in the past, or her present danger.

"It was a weary, weary walk," she continued. "It seemed at times that I must give up, and could go no further. But then I thought of your danger, and my own, and followed on. Finding some camping-ground, which I concluded must be that of Taylor and his gang, encouraged me, and so I kept on until I came to Jddy Stark's cabin. Here I found one of his men, and knew that I was near the spot. I could not find you or Blue Belt, but I watched Tom and his fellows, and when he would have shot you I tried to kill him. It was

an awful thing for me to do, but I did not stop to think about it.

"You know the result. I did not kill him, or even wound him, but I did frighten him away from the spot, and then I followed a ways, to see that they did not intend to come around some other way."

"I tried to find you, then," said Charles.

"Yes, I knew you did, but when I came to think what I was doing, and that you would probably penetrate my disguise, I lost courage, and kept away. I thought you had found the treasure, and would take it from the *cache*, and hurry back. But instead of that you seemed scared, too, and went to watching the spot. All this time I was watching, too. I felt sure that with the coming of darkness you would be molested again, and this time the result might not be so fortunate. I would have come to you and told you all, then, but could only do it by making myself known, and you do not know how I shrunk from the very idea."

"Finally you went away, and when you were gone I hurried to the *cache* and dug up the treasure."

"You dug it up—dug up the treasure?" Charles demanded, very much excited.

"Yes, I dug up the treasure, intending to keep it from Tom Taylor and his fellows, till I could put it into your hands."

"But what became of it? I remember now what Tom's chum said from the rocks. What did become of the package?"

"I was going to tell you. I was not quite soon enough, for even when I got my hand upon the parcel, I saw those men gliding through the woods. Not far away was a skeleton, and partly over the skeleton grew a thick cluster of bushes. I rose up and ran, and when I passed those bushes, thinking the guilty spirits of those men would not let them look there, I dropped the treasure close to the feet of the skeleton!"

"Is it there still?" Charles broke in.

"I do not know. I have not seen it. For a little time I was not followed, and feared they had found the bundle. But it seems they only stopped to examine the *cache*, and supposing, from my flight, when they found it empty, that I had

the contents—just what I wanted them to suspect—they came to the pursuit at once. I ran as far and fast as possible, hoping to meet you and Blue Belt, or get to some spot where I could hide away from them, for I dared not fight the three. But my speed was slow compared to those in pursuit, and I was soon overhauled by Taylor. His rage on finding that I had not the treasure was very great, and he at once determined to force a confession from me. I tried to cry out, and finally broke away, and ran some distance toward where Jeddy's cabin stood. It was very fortunate that I did so. You know what followed."

Here the speaker paused a little for rest, and then related what had occurred up to the moment of her finding Charles, wounded and given up for dead, as it seemed at the entrance of the cave.

"I had seen Blue Belt often at the tavern," she continued, "and knew him to be a true-hearted Indian if whisky was not put in his way. I could do nothing else, so I told him my story, and asked him to help me save your life. He promised, and we perfected a plan. I came on here with you, and presently George Gregory disappeared, and Meona came. I think some of these Indians, more than half-knew that I was not a Dacotah. But I kept away from them as much as possible, till Stormgoer began to follow me wherever I went. You know how that ended.

"I did not dare confess my deed as Meona, for I thought I should be at once killed. But I washed off my stain, resumed my boy's garb, and was just in time to save your life."

"And risked your own in the attempt," said Charles.

"Not for the first time," was the ready response.

"No, indeed; you have been a heroine all your life, Lens. But there is one thing I don't understand, after all."

"What is that, pray?"

"Who are you? You are not Bawny Corrol's daughter—"

"No, indeed! I never will call him father again, though I did it for so many years. But I will tell you all I can ever know, and part of this I learned from Jeddy Stark."

"How from Jeddy?"

"Because he was my grandfather. But that is anticipating the story. Shall I tell it now?"

Charles moved toward the single opening of the ~~lodge~~ which might be designated "door," and at the same time filled the place of window. He wished to note the state of affairs outside, but was met at the second step by an Indian's leveled musket, and heeded the guttural advice to

"Go back!"

It brought a momentarily unpleasant sensation, to realize, in so decided a manner, that he was still no better than a prisoner—was one, in fact; but as he could not help himself, the next best thing was to make his captivity as endurable as possible. So he turned again to Lena.

"You see we are in the hands of the red-men yet," she remarked, with a painful smile. "They feel bad, angry, jealous. I do not blame them. I only wonder they have not hung us both."

"How you talk, Lena."

"But I tell what I think. Do you forget that all this loss of braves comes from *our* presence? They are rude men, and may not reason with justice. It must be but natural that they think if we were removed, their troubles would end; and how far from right would be such a conclusion?"

"You are a little logician, as well as a heroine, I see," the young man remarked; "but pray don't plead the case of the red-man so strongly, or we shall have to give up all hope of ever getting away alive."

"*Logician*—what is the meaning of that word?" demanded Lena. "Does it mean medicine-man? If it does, you know I am used to *drugs*!"

"It does not mean quite that," returned the young man. "but it does mean that you are entirely too much for me on an argument. However, we'll drop that for the present, and you can tell me about your father and grandfather."

All was quiet outside, and seated near each other, Lena related her life-story, while Charles listened

It was brief.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCLUSION.

"ABOUT twelve years ago," began Lena, "my father came with Bawny Corrol, and founded Silver City. That is, they built two log-houses, and then a saw-mill, after which the prospect looked encouraging for a flourishing settlement. A little while after that my grandfather came, with my mother and myself. About the same time came Tom Taylor, then a young man, and some others. Tom was a drinking, quarrelsome fellow, and so notorious that nobody came to Silver City. My father brought this fact to the notice of Bawny, who was his partner, and demanded that he be got rid of, for the benefit of the settlement. But Corrol took sides against my father, and Tom swore all manner of vengeance.

"Not long afterward my mother fell sick and died.

"One night, a fearful, stormy night, my father was murdered. I can not tell you all about how it happened, but it was the deed of Tom Taylor, who so managed it that circumstances implicated my grandfather—weak old man though he was. As a result, Jddy Stark, frightened almost into insanity, fled from the settlement, came away into the wilderness, and has lived there till a few days ago. There Tom Taylor found him, burned the miserable shelter his weak hand had reared, and aroused the poor old man at last to a vow of vengeance. That vow he fulfilled at the cost of his life, and now their dead bodies lie side by side in the cavern."

A shudder at the memories her words awakened, a few tears, and the maiden was again merged into the heroine.

"I was taken in charge by Bawny Corrol, who taught me to speak and think of him as my father. I did so to a great extent, for I was alone, all alone in the world, and had no friends to whom I could fly or appeal. Oh, the dreadful deeds of that place! But I need not speak of them. I was there when your father came, and was there when you came."

"Yes, fortunately indeed for me."

"But I shall never go there again."

"Not to get your property?"

"No, indeed! I have escaped with my life, and am thankful enough for that. I would not look upon the face of Bawny Corrol again for all Silver City, and all the wilderness round it!"

"Where will you go?"

The maiden raised her eyes to his for a moment, and then dropped them sadly to the ground.

"Any where," she said, "so that I can work and earn a crust to eat and a place to lay my head. With these and a clear conscience I shall be content—satisfied!"

"Lena, you will do nothing of the kind. *My* home is to be *yours*; and the life you have saved so often, shall all be devoted to making you forget, in a happy future, the unhappy days of the past. You must be my wife, Lena, for you surely would not bring me back to life so many times, and now make it all dark by refusing that which alone will give me an opportunity to repay the past, and be happy in the future."

"But I am not fitted to be the wife of anybody; I am a wild, untutored girl, whose whole life has been passed in the wilderness."

"But you are a true woman, Lena, and a heroine of perfect fame. If you are not fully posted in all the follies of fashionable life, it is a thousand times better to be wanting in *them* than in qualities of the heart which too often *imitate*."

Lena looked up with a smile, for she knew the young man did not speak flattery. But she only said:

"We need not talk of that now, for it is very possible that we shall find a permanent home here in this forest. We are not yet free."

"Not yet, I know; but I feel that we shall soon be on our way toward the home I have pictured. Some one is coming—it must be Blue Belt."

It was Blue Belt, but he came not alone. Rolling Wind accompanied him, and he wished to consult with the prisoner.

While his manner was not really unkind, there seemed about it an avaricious, grasping air, which the young man did not wholly relish. However, all his questions were properly answered, and then he went forth, as he averred, to hold a council with his people.

It was an hour or more before the council ended, if, indeed, it had any existence, and then the chief returned to say that his people did not wish to hold the wounded man a prisoner, but they could not release the squaw-man. The squaw-man had killed one of their braves, and must remain, that the lodges of his people become not empty!

A smile passed over the face of Lena at the words, though very different was the aspect of Charles.

"Good!" the former said, in a low voice which none heard but the one she addressed. "You can go; remember the *foot of the skeleton*, and hasten on to your anxious father."

"And leave you here among the savages?" the young man demanded, almost fiercely. "Not if there is any honor in my manhood!"

"Yes, go, if they insist upon it," she persisted. "I shall not stay here long. I shall escape soon, and then—then—"

She stopped, and some emotion was manifested. They had no time for consultation, however, as the chief was in no mood to wait.

"She must go," said Charles, pointing toward Lena.

"No, she not go," was the reply, in a careless tone.

"I tell you she *must* go!" pursued the young man. "She is mine, and I can not go without her. You have Indian women to fill your wigwams and lodges; let that suffice. The white man does not take your women from their own people. This woman is not a squaw; she came with me, she must go with me."

Again the chief shook his head.

"People not let her go," he pursued; "feel very poor—very weak. Few lodges, few warriors. Pale-face come here, and hunter-braves go fight for him. Kill two braves—squaw-man kill another. Three braves gone. No game killed—no skins for cold winter."

"I know that, Rolling Wind," said Charles, changing his tactics somewhat. "Your people fought for me like brave

men, as they are. I am very thankful. They conquered their foes, and brought home their scalps. That was *glory* to them. The great chief of the pale-faces at Washington will remember very kindly this bravery of his red children. He will send them blankets, and guns, and powder, and lead, that they may be warm, and kill an abundance of game. Blue Belt shall go with me, and I will send back to his people many nice goods. But this girl of the white race can do no good to the Indians. She does not know their life—she can not learn it. Indian squaws will not teach her. The great father of the white men at Washington will be very angry, and send his soldiers to fight the red-men. That is not well. My brother is a wise man, and does not need to make himself a fool."

The chief was visibly affected. He consulted for a moment with Blue Belt, and then stood irresolute. A conflict seemed to be going on between his sensual passions and his cupidity.

Pleading, at length, that he must go and consult his people, he left the lodge, followed by Blue Belt. Charles would have given much could he have exchanged a word with that personage, unobserved; but, on reaching the door, he turned and gave a sign to the white, which the young man had no difficulty in construing favorably. He merely touched the spot upon his arm, where the sealing of brotherhood had taken place, and then was gone.

It was not very long until Rolling Wind returned, and he was now more disposed than before to yield. It was a large ransom he required; but with his vision of the treasure at the foot of the skeleton, Marline was not disposed to heed trifles.

The bargain was finally made, and all particulars agreed upon, with one exception. He wished Lena to remain a prisoner until the ransom was brought. To this Charles would not for an instant consent, for he knew that the treaty would amount to nothing in that case.

It was afternoon before the bargain was concluded. But it was satisfactory at length.

Blue Belt was to accompany the twain to the outpost, where Charles could obtain the necessary supplies. Three horses were furnished the brave, two of which the whites

could ride to this point, and upon which the stores could be brought back. All the arms which belonged to Charles and Lena, Blue Belt was to retain till the post should be reached, except in case of danger, and the weapons of the other white men were to be retained by the Indians.

When all these details had been agreed upon, Lena's arms were unbound, and the lovers indulged in one hearty embrace. It no doubt appeared astonishing to the Indians, but proved highly satisfactory to the parties most interested.

Charles would listen to no delay, and when Blue Belt had set before them a quantity of dried meat, and placed more upon his saddle, they mounted and rode away.

And we venture that it was not the saddest moment of their lives when the Indian settlement was lost sight of.

First, naturally enough, Blue Belt was directed to take the most undeviating line toward the *cache*. As his eyes were anxious to behold the piles of new goods he was to bear home to his people, he heeded any suggestions of his companions, so that the place was reached in something like two hours' ride.

How wildly Charles rode to the spot where the skeleton still lay, and bent over, peering into the bushes before he dismounted ! And Lena was but little less excited, and rode close to his side.

"Yes, there it is !" he shouted, and with the words, he sprung from his horse, and grasped the bundle, while every nerve trembled with excitement as the realization of his hopes, or his utter disappointment, turned upon the revelations of a single moment !

It must be the treasure, he thought, for it was very heavy, as he supposed the bundle must be. But the outer wrapper was removed, and nothing disclosed.

Another moment, and with a loud shout he sprung upon his horse, while he repeated, wildly :

"All right, boys ; all right, Blue Belt ; you shall go home and make your people glad for once !"

He had secured the treasure at last.

There were a few great dull lumps of gold, of no particular beauty, but heavy and valuable, while the bulk of the fortune was inclosed in a water-proof belt, and composed of

negotiable paper. This he examined carefully. It was damp and moldy, requiring careful handling, but no doubt still potent as a representative of value.

This he carefully secured about his body, and disposed in the best possible manner of the yellow lumps, after which they rode toward the cavern in the cliff.

A deadly stench greeted them, but despite this fact, they dug a shallow grave, and carefully, placed the body of Jed Stark therein. Lena dropped a tear to consecrate the spot, and then they rode on, leaving the carcasses of the two desperadoes to fester in the poisoned atmosphere of the cavern.

Toward the close of the next day a trading post was reached, and here, with some difficulty, Charles succeeded in bartering one of his "lumps" for the supplies promised Rolling Wind. The addition of a nice new blanket and a gun for Blue Belt did not produce any dissatisfaction in the mind of that worthy individual, and then the "brothers" parted; Blue Belt to return to his people, while Charles journeyed on toward the rising sun and his (prospective) happy home, which he finally reached without further mishap, and the broken-down father was delighted beyond measure to grasp his gold and paper again. But he was surprised to see that a neatly-dressed young lady accompanied his son.

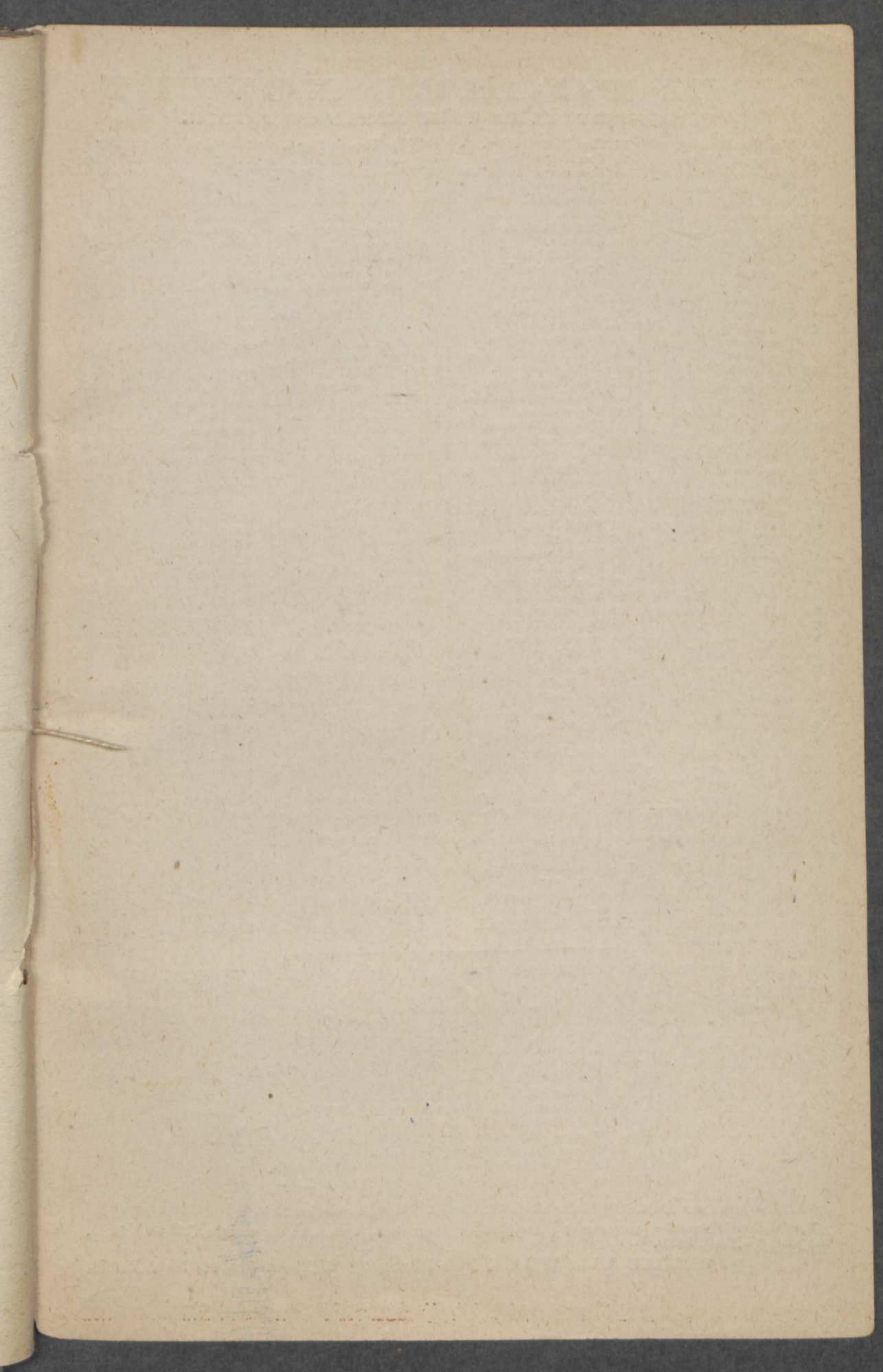
And when the whole story had been told, he simply joined their hands, saying:

"Children, you have my full blessing; my advice I don't think you need."

At her own request Lena devoted a year to study, not of polite false-heartedness, but of that practical education she so much needed. And she made almost wonderful progress.

Then she became Charles Marline's wife, and in meeting the ordinary trials of life she has proved quite as much a heroine as in those days whose history we have recorded.

THE END.



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